

THREE EDITION.



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"HERE'S A BRAVE LAD AND TRUE!" CRIED THE PRIESTESS OF FORTUNE. "BUT IT'S METAL THAT'S TO BE RUNG ON THE ANVIL."

SHORTLY after the close of the war, Jason Ashmead led a company of farmers from the State of Maine across the great plains into the heart of Colorado.

They were steady-going, hard-headed Puritans, content to give a dollar's worth of honest sweat for every dollar they put into their pockets, and rather disposed to "squeeze the coin till the eagle

Little Leather-Breeches.

screamed" before letting it slip through their fingers.

On their arrival in the New Eldorado it chanced that they found the Powder Creek Gulch "booming," and in an hour the idea of trudging after the plow-tail was scorned, and every man of them saw himself a millionaire—in imagination!

But the Powder Creek Gulch "petered out," "in a way"—to quote Bill Nye—"I despise," and one year from date our hunters of the golden fleece found themselves with both breeches pockets turned inside out—"bu'sted!"

There were "natural-born" miners in the Gulch, and they slung their kits over their shoulders to their pick-helves, lighted their little black pipes, gave a jaunty cock to their ragged hats as if in defiance of Fate, and "stamped," cheerily wishing one another "better luck next time."

Then Farmer Ashmead called his company to a serious consideration as to whether that sort of thing payed.

"It's all very well for men who have nobody but themselves in the world," he said; "but we have women and children on our hands; and when it comes to a question of dragging them up hill and down dale through these mountains, I for one vote *No!* We are farmers, and if we keep to that, we shall know what to look out for. Now, you all know that ten miles down the creek there is as pretty land as lies outdoors. I propose that we take it up, and leave off this fooling."

This wise counsel prevailed; and fifteen years later, at the opening of our story, Glendale was a thriving little village, in nowise envious of the mining-camps which all about sprung up, flourished, and disappeared, almost in a day.

So much by way of "getting the lay of the land." Now for the story.

"Ha! ha! ho! ho! The devils are out to-night! How they writhe and hiss and spit their venom! Hear them howl with rage, and chatter and laugh with impish glee! Ho! ho! I'm with ye, my little ones! my pretty ones! Come down—come down! Fill earth and air and heaven! Ha! Beezlebub, old Mumbo Jumbo hails ye Prince of Darkness!"

A vivid flash of lightning that seemed to rend the sky from zenith to horizon disclosed a hideous old hag standing on a pinnacle of rock overlooking a valley.

Her bent form, her fantastic dress of fluttering rags, her withered and leather-brown face, her eyes twinkling with crafty malice, the one discolored fang that shut down over her nether lip, her fingers like the talons of some bird of prey—made up as hideous a creature as ever haunted the dreams of a half-crazy religious fanatic.

She supported herself with a long staff, a sapling roughly stripped of its leaves; huge brass crescents hung from her nose and ears, and her hair was built up in tufts on either side of her head, after the fashion of some of the savage people of Africa.

Legend said that this was once a beautiful quadroon, driven to despair and enmity toward all mankind by the cruelties of race hatred; but another said that she had been a belle in New Orleans in her youth, and that it was a freak of madness that made her now play the Negro Voodoo woman.

At all events, her speech was free from the patois of the slave, and her features were unmistakably Caucasian.

"Ha! ha! a fair night! a sweet night! a night for such work as mine! Come with me, ye devils! I have a pretty sight for ye! Ye love murder, do ye? So do I! Ye love dead men—dead by the hand of violence? Ha! ha! come with me, my little ones! my pretty ones!"

So chuckling to herself, she hobbled off in the darkness, picking her way with her staff, quite indifferent to the pelting rain and eddying blasts, until she came to where a tumbling brook rested for a while in deep, still holes.

"Here's a place for murder!" she whispered, hoarsely. "Ha! ha! here's a famous place to whisper perfumed vows! Ho! ho! here's a place to leap out of the world, down! down! down! into the bottomless pit, where the devils dance in the flames!"

Where a stunted tree, draped heavily with a vine, hung over the water, she knelt, parting the leaves and gazing intently into the black water, waiting for a flash of lightning to illuminate the spot.

It came presently, a long, quivering, zigzag stream of fire.

Something gleamed white in the bottom of the pool. One beholding it unexpectedly would have

shrunk back with a shudder of horror and a quailing chill of fear.

The old hag cackled in her hideous glee.

"Ha! ha! Did you see it, my little ones? did ye see it, my pretty ones? Come all ye imps of darkness! here's a pretty sight! His flesh to the fishes, his bones to old Mumbo Jumbo, and his soul to the devil! Ho! he was a fine fellow, I tell you! No dying in bed for him! He died with his boots on! It was a bloody death! Ho! ye should have seen the blood, and the knife!—ho! ho! a famous knife! Here it is! Do you see that black spot on the hilt? That's blood!—his heart's blood! All the water that falls from heaven in a twelvemonth couldn't wash that out!

"But the night's going! To work! to work! Ha! ha! here you are, loves! One! two! three! four! five!—"

At each count she thrust her hand into the water and drew something forth.

Presently she rose; and now the flashes of lightning showed that she had a bag on her back.

Thus burdened, she tottered back to the crag where we introduced her to the reader.

In the valley below appeared the twinkling lights of Glendale.

She waved her staff toward it, crying in a harsh, shrill voice:

"Curses on ye all! curses, I say! May pestilence, famine and murder scourge ye, till youth withers in its bloom, while old age chides the lagging death that will not free it from its misery! Curses on ye! curses! curses! curses!"

Hoarsely went out her voice on the blast, her execrations dying away in a sort of gurgle that horribly suggested strangulation.

As if in answer to her bitter curse, the heavens opened, and the earth shuddered with the reverberating thunder.

An instant later one of the buildings in the village was enveloped in flames, darting their red tongues up toward the black and muttering heavens!

"Ha! ha! ho! ho!" chuckled the witch. "The charm begins to work already! Didn't I tell ye, my little ones, my pretty ones? It's the murderer pleading with the devil that does it! Ha! ha! ho! ho!"

"Hallo, you old vagabones!" shouted a gruff voice close at hand. "What have ye got hyar? Been stealin', have ye? Come! trot it out!"

The old hag turned, and a quivering flash of lightning showed her a man in the rough dress of the mountains, with his hat slouched down over his eyes and the collar of his coat drawn up about his neck while his hands were thrust into the side-pockets.

"Ho! master," she cried, with no evidence of alarm, "is that you? I know ye, Hank Drake. You're left-hand cousin to the devil! But I like ye all the better for that. You're my kind, you are. You've a liking for striking in the dark! Ha! ha!"

"Stow yer gaff, ye old buzzard! What's that you've got in that bag?"

"Ha! ha! ho! ho!" cackled the old hag. "Ye think it's chickens, don't ye? Ha! ha! Or maybe ye think it's a lamb, or a suckling pig. Oh, no, my lad! I didn't get it in the village. They don't keep such things down there to steal. Oh, no! the devil gave it to me!"

"Turn it out, and let's see what it is, anyway."

"It's a friend of yours," she said, with her malicious chuckle.

Then stooping, she took hold of the lower corners of the bag, and timing the movement with a vivid flash of lightning, she lifted the bottom and poured the contents out on the ground, saying:

"It's Tom Grayle! Ha! ha! ho! ho! He was a rare one, and a friend of yours! Ye didn't think to meet me here to-night, did ye?"

The man stared with eyes distended with terror at a mass of bones, the human character of which could not be mistaken.

The skull fell so that it seemed to grin at him.

With a shriek he rushed away in the darkness, down the declivity, toward the village.

The old hag caught up her staff, and waving it toward him, screamed after him:

"Murder! murder! murder!"

The rapid tolling of a church bell in the village now spread the alarm of fire, and dark forms could be seen rushing to and fro.

Faintly in the occasional lull of the wind came the cry:

"Fire! fire! fire!"

And there on the cliff stood the hag, shrieking:

"Curses on ye all! It's Mumbo Jumbo that execrates ye! Curses! curses! curses!"

The shivering and shuddering wretch whom

she had unnerved, no doubt by awaking his conscience, rushed on headlong toward the light, until, with ghastly face, protruding eyes, and chattering teeth, he staggered up to the excited villagers.

"Hallo, Hank Drake!" cried one of them. "What's the matter with ye, man? Ye look as if ye had seen a ghost!"

"Boys!" he gasped, pointing backward, "it's up thar! up thar!"

"Up whar? What is? What air ye talkin' about?"

"It's that old devil's dam! She done it!"

"Mumbo Jumbo?"

"Yes! yes! This hyer's her work! She done it. She cursed ye an' called down the lightnin'!"

When he had become a little more composed, he described the curse, but omitted all reference to the skeleton the sight of which had so startled him.

It was plain that his auditors were prepared for something of this sort. They listened with gloomy brows while the flames roared heavenward and the charred timbers crumbled and fell to a heap of ruins.

Then rose murmurs of wrath, which swelled into open denunciation.

"Boys," said one man, presently. "We've stood this thing about long enough. What's the matter with the widdy Mowry's cow, I want to know? It ain't two weeks since that old devil's limb cursed the widdy for stoppin' her from stealin' a loaf that she had set out to cool. 'Ye'll want milk fur that bread' says she; an' that's the critter with bloody milk a'ready. An' then didn't little Ben Darrach fall into the cellar ten days ago, with the chance of his never standin' square on his pins ag'in in this world?"

With this beginning the vindictive excitement waxed until it was proposed to go and "tear her out."

Then there was a hurried snatching up of fagots, and, lighted by their lurid glare, the mob rushed up to the witch's hut.

Without stopping to see whether the door was fastened or not, they beat it in and rushed into the hut.

"Boys, thar ain't hide nor hair of her hyar!" said one, in evident disgust at their disappointment.

"Of course not," said another. "When it's as easy to go up in the air as down in the ground, what kin' you expect? She'd be a fool to stop hyar fur ye to pounce onto her."

"Let's burn the old rookery down, anyway!"

And the fellow applied the torch under the eaves.

But while the search had been in progress, a light spring-wagon with four sprited horses attached to it had dashed up, the driver swinging his long lash and yelling at the top of his voice.

"Just in time!" he cried, as he drew his horses in so sharply that they reared and pawed the air. "Now go for 'em! Lay 'em out! Ha-a-a-a-ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! ha!"

"The Mad Millionaire!" cried one of the men.

From the seat beside him a youth made a flying leap over the wheel, and springing upon the fellow who was about to set fire to the hut, he snatched the torch from his hand and dashed it to the ground.

"None o' that, boys," he said, with as much assurance as if he had been a man among them.

"Who air you?" was the angry demand—a mere formula of wrath, since all present knew him perfectly well.

His reply was prompt and pointed.

"Yours truly, Little Leather-Breeches!"

And drawing a brace of revolvers, he stood between the mob and the witch's hut, with cool determination stamped on his young face.

CHAPTER II.

AN OMINOUS FORTUNE.

THE afternoon of the day following the night on which our story opens.

A picnic ground!

A bevy of girls such as the outdoor life of the West can produce—some pretty, some not so pretty, but none without freshness and rosy good health.

"For my part," cried the rather haughty Kate Ashmead, "I think he is altogether too fresh! A boy of his years had no business intermeddling with men."

"Why didn't your men put him down then?" retorted Mary Dennis. "Because they couldn't spell able?"

"Hold on, girls," interposed laughing Sadie Cartwright. "There is no use in *your* quarreling over Little Leather-Breeches. The blushing Miss Briggs looks as if she had something to say on that subject!"

"Sadie Cartwright, I think you are as mean as you can be!"

"Oh! don't make any mystery of it, my dear Belle. Everybody knows that there is a fair prospect of your devoting the rest of your natural life keeping buttons on those famous buckskin unmentionables!"

And the laugh went round at Belle Briggs's expense, while Kate Ashmead's eyes flashed scornfully at her.

They rested on the most sensitive and lady-like face in the group; yet there were times when the girl asserted herself with a quiet dignity which mastered even headstrong Kate Ashmead.

"Still water runs deep!" the latter was fond of quoting. "One of these days you will hear from Miss Belle Briggs, mark my words! Ben Souder is nobody's fool!"

Ben was the village cobbler—the man who knew everything. He had, or, to the simple folk about him, seemed to have, all history, ancient and modern, at his tongue's end; and he could quote Scripture to prove that every event, discovery and invention, past, present and to come, had been foreseen and described "as plain as the nose on your face," if you only had the eyes to see it as he did.

What he had said about Belle Briggs was:

"Ef she onc't gits waked up—"

And he had finished his ominous prognostic with a mysterious shake of the head.

So often had this been urged by Kate Ashmead, prompted by jealous rivalry, that every one had unconsciously come to half-expect some startling fulfillment.

Kate was now casting about for some sarcasm when Sadie Cartwright interposed:

"Hush! here he comes to speak for himself!"

All turned to see a youth of nineteen or twenty approach, dressed jauntily in a slouch hat, red woolen shirt and buckskin breeches, with fringes down the leg. A leather belt held a revolver at his back and a bowie-knife on his hip. For the rest, he had a frank, cheerful face, and wore his blonde hair to his shoulders.

"See! the conquering hero comes!" shouted gay Sadie Cartwright. "After this the parson will have to take a back seat, and Abe Seaver will be just nowhere! Poor Abe! Sheep's eyes will go begging this winter!"

"When will saucy Sadie's tongue enable her to ride in her own turnout?" asked Little Leather-Breeches, entering into her spirit of banter.

"Oh! anybody can answer that!" laughed the beauty, promptly. "If she keeps it a-waggin' till she's a little hoarse!"

"Meanwhile, I suppose you girls are off here by yourselves plotting mischief of some kind."

"Not a bit of it! We have been engaged in target practice."

"With Cupid's darts? You are all skillful enough at that already."

"La! hasn't he a sweet tongue! But we have been using a far more deadly weapon. Ever since last night there seems to be a general desire to qualify as a warrior's bride!"

"You don't say! And who has proved most proficient?"

"Ha! ha! ha! Just see him! Oh! you needn't look at the bashful Miss Briggs! She handles a hymn-book more cleverly than a hair trigger."

"Don't believe her, Will!" cried Mary Dennison. "Belle beat us all."

"Here comes the parson," persisted Miss Cartwright. "We'll see if he hasn't a word to say about that!"

Down a woodland aisle came a very fine gentleman of about five-and-twenty with white hands and long, slender fingers, dressed in clerical black, and wearing mutton-chop whiskers and a white cravat.

He was accompanied by a middle-aged lady, who seemed greatly flattered by his attentions.

"Who is this young Fosdick, Mrs. Ashmead?" he had just asked.

"Well, nobody rightly knows," was the reply.

"You see, fourteen years ago the Indians made a clean sweep of the country north of here; and the day after the massacre a little chap rode into the Glen on a very big horse, and introduced himself as Willy Fosdick, but said that he was generally called Little Leather-Breeches. A little girl, scarcely more than a baby, was mounted behind him, and the two were tied fast to the horse. She could give no account of herself; and when asked he said that she was not his

sister, but his little wife, and her name was Belle. Mrs. Briggs had just lost her twins by scarlatina; so she adopted them both.

"Quite a romance!" said the Rev. Mr. Vance, who had introduced himself as a divinity student seeking health in the West.

And now, before Sadie Cartwright could assail him with her merry banter, there came an interruption from another direction.

"I say, girls! here's fun! Old Mumbo Jumbo's comin' this way. Now's the chance to git yer fortins told."

The speaker, who was hurrying toward the group, was a young man whose virgin cheek had never never been violated by a razor. It was covered by a fine blonde down. He was what is known as "shock-headed."

He was a prime favorite with all the middle-aged women of the village; but with the young girls—Well, Abe Seaver was a good fellow when you wanted anything done, he was so obliging.

"What d'ye say, Belle?" he asked, at once going up to Miss Briggs with open homage.

Catching a twinkle in Sadie Cartwright's eye, Belle flushed and replied inaudibly.

"Here they are!" cried a cheery voice, and a lot of young fellows, rough in dress, yet honest looking, made their appearance with a long rope.

With a rush they swept down upon the group of girls, circling around them so as to wind them in the rope; and for a few minutes all was confusion, the whisking of draperies, and screams and laughter.

This sport was broken in upon by the harsh voice of Mumbo Jumbo, crying:

"A gay world! a merry world! as if death and sorrow wasn't always peeping over one's shoulder! Ho! ho! we laugh to-day, but tomorrow brings tears! The brighter the sunshine on one side, the blacker the shadow on the other; and ye can look out of heaven into hell! That's gospel! Can ye deny that, parson?"

The laughter ceased, and the girls drew nearer to the gallants with whom they had got more or less markedly paired off without any apparent design, while they gazed at the old hag with dilated eyes and little shivers of dread made delightful by the sense of security.

The stout young fellows who were not afraid of the devil in the person of an old woman proceeded to coax her into good-humor, while they urged forward the girls, who were certainly not entirely free from superstitious fears.

With the varying fortunes of the young people who are not intimately concerned in our story, we will not trouble the reader. Suffice it to say that they got amusement, embarrassment, bewilderment, joy and fear out of them.

In his turn Abe Seaver stood forth with a red spot in either cheek and his breath hurried.

"Dark! dark! dark!" muttered the old woman, as she bent over his hand. "Your line of life is crossed before it reaches midway. The heavens did not smile on your cradle, my poor boy! There's mourning here, and pain—bitter pain and disappointment, worse than death. That's life. Ah! the curse of it!"

Her voice choked with passion and her old frame shook.

The color all gone out of his face, Abe slunk away.

"It's all right," he said to himself. "I ain't worthy of her, an' that's a fact!"

The minister came next. On his face was a smile of kindly patronage.

Instead of taking the silver he extended, old Mumbo Jumbo looked into his face, and raising her hand with the palm toward him, waved him off, while she retreated without a word.

Only a slight tightening of the lips, a quivering of the nostrils, and a hardening of the eye, showed the minister's chagrin. He recovered himself instantly.

"My good woman," he said, "I have only sympathy and pity for you!"

She made no reply, but looked at him steadily as he turned away.

Some of the fellows, who liked a joke better than a sermon, snickered.

"The parson's one too many for her."

But already Little Leather-Breeches had taken his turn.

"Here's a brave lad and true!" cried the priestess of fortune. "But it's metal that's to be rung on the anvil. Here's a dark wood filled with terrors; but if you have strength and courage, you'll find a fair country on the other side. Here's gray hairs and honor, and a woman's tears and kisses—tears of pride and kisses of tenderness. But you'll find a scorpion under rose leaves. Beware! Its sting is swift and deadly!"

Little Leather-Breeches smiled with easy incredulity.

"I should like to know what can be made out of that!"

Belle went forward with a strange stillness upon her.

Mumbo Jumbo looked into her face with a smile as she took her hand, and then dropped her eyes to the fair palm with its delicate tracery of creases. Then a startling, a terrible change came over her.

"Ha-a-ah!" she fairly shrieked, flinging the hand away from her. "It's red with blood! Take it away! take it away! take it away!"

And spitting upon the coin she had received, she threw it on the ground, and hobbled off as fast as her tottering limbs could carry her, still waving the startled girl off with her opposed palm, and muttering hoarsely:

"Away! away! away!"

Belle turned round and gazed at her friends in piteous helplessness. All the color had fled from her cheeks, and a white circle formed about her mouth.

Little Leather-Breeches sprung forward and threw his arm about her.

"What does she mean, Will?" she asked him, her voice seeming to die away with a sigh.

"I'll very soon show her what I mean!" cried the youth, hotly. "Here, stay with Abe until I break every bone in her wretched old body, the dev—"

But the girl's slight frame swayed and her head sunk on his shoulder.

She had fainted.

She was immediately surrounded by friends, with ejaculations of sympathy, and everything was done to restore her to consciousness.

Only Kate Ashmead stood aloof; and when Belle was herself again, save for white cheeks and lips, and a frightened, piteous appeal in her eyes, Kate whispered to a little circle who drank in the poison of suspicion open-mouthed:

"I've said it before, and I say it again:—Ben Souder is nobody's fool!"

CHAPTER III.

MURDER!

THE great kitchen at farmer Ashmead's was filled with a golden glow from the wide fireplace, with its pile of crackling, flame-wrapped logs.

It was not that the night was cold enough for so roaring a fire. Indeed, to temper its heat the doors and windows had to be thrown open.

But farmer Ashmead had been "raised" in Maine, and he thought that a merry-making would be no merry-making at all unless the "boys and girls" could dance in the firelight.

Ben Souder was posted beside the door leading from the kitchen to the "best room," so that the "old folks," sitting there in straight-backed Yankee sedateness, might have the benefit of the music—so called—which he worried out of a rather squeaky fiddle.

But whatever it lacked in sweetness it made up in quickness of time, a little jerky because Ben despised the cider with which the dancers contented themselves, and would "steady his hand" with nothing short of New England rum.

The young fellows "hoed down" the rapid measure in their heavy boots as nimbly, if not as gracefully, as any French dancing-master, and now and then found their way to a sly corner for love-making.

But the girls, whenever there were two or three together, must have their gossip.

"And the way she has been carrying on with the parson! I wonder that Will Fosdick stands it."

"Oh! Little Leather-Breeches ain't afraid of the Pretty Man from the States! Lily-white fingers do to turn hymn-books; but Will knows Belle is too spirited to live on donation parties."

"Look! look! There comes Abe now! Just see how pale he is. And he is watching Belle and the parson like a hawk! I tell you there's going to be mischief there before they get through with it!"

The villagers were for the most part that sort of good folk who must have ideas driven into their heads with a beetle and wedge; but once in, they stuck. And the witch's terrible prognostic had made a deep impression.

From this vague suspicion of Belle, they got to thinking that Abe had been hard used, though heretofore they had laughed at his lovenaking.

Then rose rumors of quarrels, which soon took definite form in stories of abusive language and threats hurled at Abe, to which he submitted with the dumb humility of a dog.

Who would have believed that all this fabric of misrepresentation was based upon some ill-

Little Leather-Breeches.

natured innuendoes of Kate Ashmead and pieced out by gossip, as it passed from lip to lip!

Now, as Abe made his appearance, looking so wild, a buzz of eager tittle-tattle ran round the room.

Belle saw him staring with wolfish menace at her partner, and signaling to her with a look of appeal.

She saw the girls exchange meaning glances as they turned in the dance.

Even from the "best room" the older women came to the door to peer through.

The girl's cheek flamed scarlet, and a bitter indignation burned in her eye.

"What right has that lout to persecute me like this?" she cried to herself. "And Will, if he cared a straw, would take him out and cool the ardor of his calf-love in the horse-pond!"

And she flashed a blaze of scorn at poor Abe, that caused him to slink from the room with his head on his breast and tears starting to his eyes.

"Take me out of here, please!" she said to her partner. "This room is suffocating!"

The Rev. Mr. Vance was nothing loth. His heart was beating more rapidly than was its wont.

The house was set in a grove and surrounded with clustering shrubbery, and a few steps took them out of sight and hearing of the revelers within-doors.

Then the minister clasped the hand that rested on his arm, and with an impulsive motion passed his arm about the girl's waist.

"Belle, my darling!" he whispered, bending so as to bring his face close to hers, and peering into her eyes to catch their expression in the dim light that came to them from the house, the night sky being overcast. "Can it be that this great happiness is coming to me? I love—"

But she tore herself from his clasp with a cry of exasperation.

"You too?" she exclaimed. "Has everybody combined to annoy me?"

"To annoy you?" he repeated, in low, tense tones. "To annoy you with the declaration of my love?"

"A fig for your love! I tell you I am sickened by this nonsense; and if I am to be made an object for every fool to gape at, by a lot of puling—"

But choking with anger and distress, she broke off and fled from him back to the house.

The minister stood perfectly still in the darkness. No eye could see the expression of his face, to know how he was affected by this rebuff.

But Belle's angry voice had been heard as far as the house.

A moment later she appeared at the door, panting and white with emotion.

Another figure was seen to follow her; stopping her just beyond the threshold.

Abe Seaver plucked her by the dress, whispering:—

"Belle! Belle! one word! I have something that I must tell you!"

As she turned round the light streamed out upon him, showing his face fairly ghastly in its pallor and drawn with pain.

Everybody turned toward the door, and a buzz of wonderment and condemnation arose.

"Abe Seaver!" cried the tortured girl, whirling upon him with one foot on the threshold, "if you ever dare to speak to me again as long as you live, I'll—I'll—"

But passion and pain choked her. She was stung beyond endurance. She knew her gossip-loving neighbors, and their narrow prejudices. She knew that all her life her treatment of Abe Seaver would be commented upon behind her back. Knowing this, and how entirely innocent she was of blame, the instinct of resentment from which we are none of us free blazed up; and as quick as light she struck him a stinging blow on the cheek with her open hand.

With an exclamation of distress he shrunk back out of the range of light as quickly as if the blow had knocked him down.

A cry of indignation came like an echo from the company in the room.

The girl turned and faced them, with her eyes dilated and her lips apart, as if frightened at what she had done.

She saw frowns of condemnation on every side. It seemed to her as if her life had been blighted by that one unlucky loss of self-control.

The community in which she lived would make her an outcast, and Will Fosdick would despise her!

With a blended cry and sob, she turned and fled like a hunted creature.

Little Leather-Breeches had been in the

"best room," playing the gallant to a toothless old lady, and enjoying her pleasure hugely.

His attention was first attracted by Belle's angry rebuff of Abe Seaver. Then came the blow, the exclamations of disapproval, and the flight of poor Belle.

Far from being affected as she had supposed, he was in a rage with everybody who dared to judge her harshly.

With a resentful blaze in his eyes, he sprung forward, shouldering everybody out of his way, whether man or woman, with equal want of ceremony, and so sped through the kitchen and out of doors like a flash.

But he was too late to prevent a terrible calamity from involving the one in whom his heart was wrapped up!

Down the road came a mad rattling of wheels and clatter of hoofs at full gallop, which drew up before the house at the moment that Abe Seaver stopped Belle on the threshold.

As Little Leather-Breeches leaped through the door, another sprung into his place, shouting:

"Come, good people! Down with your windows and to with your doors! The very heavens are going to clap together in less than thirty seconds! Listen! Don't you hear the roar of the winds?"

The speaker was the person who had driven Little Leather-Breeches up to the witch's hut some weeks before in the nick of time.

He was dressed in black, with a flowing cloak and a high-crowned, sugar-loaf hat. A mustache and pointed beard of black, and hair falling to his shoulders of the same hue, together with a dark complexion and intensely black eyes that glittered with an unnatural light, made him a man of startling aspect.

"The Mad Millionaire!" exclaimed somebody. But several voices cried:

"Hush!"

Then in the silence that fell was heard the roar of the approaching hurricane; but above it, cutting the listening silence like a knife, came the sharp ring of a pistol-shot.

A spasmodic gasp passed through the room. Everybody looked at everybody else with startled questioning in their eyes. Then all shuddered, as a woman's piercing shriek seemed caught up by the whirling winds and swept from earth to heaven!

"It is the witch's prediction!" cried Kate Ashmead, and then shrunk shuddering, as she realized the implication of her words.

The men sprang toward the door with angry ejaculations, an oath escaping the lips of one or two, coupled with a threat in one case.

With murmurs of distress and fear, the women clung to each other, cowering and sobbing with dread.

Then the house was invaded by the tempest. Windows rattled and doors slammed, and the whole building shook and strained under the fierce buffets of the Storm King.

The women now screamed in terror, fearing a whirlwind in which all would be blown away to destruction.

The men shouted, and one or two stopped to secure the windows and doors; but the rest kept on, fascinated by the horror of that pistol-shot.

They found a man lying dead on his face, and a woman kneeling beside him who wailed:

"Oh! I am a murderer! He is dead! dead! dead!"

The man was Abe Seaver.

The woman was unhappy Belle Briggs!

Before them stood Little Leather-Breeches, gazing from one to the other as if stupefied.

CHAPTER IV.

A WILD RIDE.

"A MURDERESS!" repeated one of the men, with an ugly scowl. "The devil's dam said it, and here it is to the letter!"

Little Leather-Breeches started as if stung, and whirled upon the speaker.

"What's that, John Boyce?" he cried, involuntarily carrying his hand toward his back, and then remembering that he was not armed.

"You'll not better it by being over-ready to add another to it!" said the older man, severely, noticing the gesture.

"In heaven's name, what's this, neighbors?" cried farmer Ashmead, now coming up.

"The jade has finished by putting a bullet through him," was the reply.

"Oh! no, no, no!" cried Belle, starting up. "I did not do it! Indeed! indeed!"

"We came upon her while the horror was on her, and before she thought of denying it; and it was she herself that first put the brand of murderer on her!"

"Oh! but I did not mean that! He killed

himself. I meant that I had driven him to it by my harshness a minute ago. But he killed himself. I saw the flash of the weapon. And then when he fell I screamed and ran here to him. I did not suppose that he would do anything so wicked as this. I did not mean to strike him; but he goaded me beyond endurance."

"He'll goad you no more!" was the bitter reply.

Some one had knelt beside the prostrate man, and was fumbling about his body to see if there were yet signs of life.

"Lights! lights! bring lights!" shouted farmer Ashmead.

"Here comes a light."

In that roaring wind, against which the men could scarcely stand, no candle or lamp could have lived for an instant; but some one had snatched a brand from the fireplace, and now came running, the blaze at the end of his fagot burning blue when it burned at all.

Every once in a while it was blown entirely out, but to start into flame again at the shifting of the wind.

It was brought under the lee of several men who stood close together, and gave forth an uncertain, flickering illumination.

By it the man kneeling by Seaver was revealed. It was the minister. He was very pale. Those about suspected him of interest in Belle; but none of them knew that words of love for her were scarcely yet cold on his lips.

"Friends," he said, looking up and speaking with the gravity and the hush that death inspires, "this is a sad business. The man seems to be quite dead, and yet, strange to say, I find no trace of blood on him."

By this time every one was chilled by the icy wind that seemed as if it drove fairly through one.

"Fetch him indoors, boys!" said farmer Ashmead. "Nothing can be done out here in the cold."

"Give us a hand here, under his back," said one who knelt to lift him.

A volunteer sprung forward, but ere he had got hold of the other's hand, the first exclaimed:

"Ey! what is this? Why, his back is all bloody! Hold the light here."

It was done, and troubled eyes strained to see what horror would be revealed.

Belle had hurried to farmer Ashmead's side, and clasped his arm despairingly.

"Oh, sir!" she cried, sinking upon her knees, "you do not believe that I would do anything so wicked? so terrible? He shot himself, I declare to you! I was over there—see?—by that bush when I saw the flash!"

But the man had stern Puritan blood in his veins. The bitterness of an iron creed had so permeated his nature that he knew nothing but the fierce justice of an eye for an eye!

He shook off her suppliant touch, and bent forward to see what the torch would reveal.

"There it is! Do you see that, men?" asked one of the examiners.

"What is it?" asked farmer Ashmead.

"He shot himself," replied the other with savage scorn—in the back!"

"What's this?" cried another. "Hold the light here. I struck something just now with my foot."

"There it is! A pistol! It's the weapon that finished him!"

Eager hands picked it up.

It was a beautiful little pearl-handled revolver.

"Give it to me!" cried Little Leather-Breeches, extending his hand quickly, as if to snatch it.

"Not so fast, my young buck!" said the man, holding it out of reach. "We'll know who it belongs to, first."

"It is mine!" cried Belle, in wonder, not realizing what gravity lay in such a confession.

"Oh, no, no, no!" cried Little Leather-Breeches, trying to stop her.

But it was too late.

The man who held the weapon laughed brutally.

"No thanks to you for owning it," he said.

"There's a plenty that know it by sight; I, for one. I knew it the minute I set my peepers on it."

Belle now stood with eyes dilated and lips apart, the picture of terror. She saw the net that was closing about her.

"Oh!" she cried, wildly. "I am innocent! Indeed! indeed I am innocent!"

The minister turned his eyes upon her. He said not a word, but his white face and those sad eyes hurt her more than the cruel chuckle of the illiterate brute who gloated over the possession of that telling evidence against her.

"Weyby—Winters—take charge of her!" said farmer Ashmead, sternly.

"Never! You shall not touch her while I live!" shouted Little Leather-Breeches.

With the spring of a panther he swooped down upon the man who held the revolver, dealt him a stunning blow, and, at the same instant, snatched the weapon from his hand.

With another bound he placed himself between the cowering girl and her foes.

"Stand back!" he shouted, now fairly beside himself with terror at what he—even *he!*—now believed that the rash hand of his loved one had done.

But love comes before law! No regulation of human justice—no need of human society—weighed a feather with him now. With every man's hand against her, he put himself at her side.

She was a murderer? Be it so! He would be a murderer—her equal in that!—before a hand should be laid upon her in anger!

"Stand back!" he shouted, "or, by the ever-living God, I will drop the first man that dares to take a step forward!"

They knew him. He daunted the boldest of them.

Still he knew that he could not, single-handed, withstand them all for any length of time.

Was there not one in all that knew her and him who would stand their friend in this their time of sorest need?

Oh! if it were any one but Abe Seaver! He could have been counted upon to defend her, right or wrong. But it was he, the most devoted of the devoted, that her hand had beaten down to death!

Little Leather-Breeches turned sick at the thought. His despairing eyes went round from face to face, and suddenly a light of eager relief broke over his countenance.

"Barclay!" he cried, starting forward and extending his hand.

"I'm your man!" was the prompt response.

And a figure leaped forward and passed him, with a great flapping, like the wings of a monster bat.

"The Mad Millionaire!" exclaimed a voice.

"The devil!" declared another.

And all were suddenly impressed with the appropriateness of the suggestion, applied to that weird-looking person.

At that instant the snow came in a blinding flurry, extinguishing the torch and wrapping all in profound darkness.

"After them, men!" cried farmer Ashmead, thinking to take advantage of that protection from Little Leather-Breeches's aim.

There was a rush and a fierce struggle.

Little Leather-Breeches had the good sense to know that the killing of a single man at random would not help his cause, so he flung down the revolver and grappled with the first man who tried to rush past him.

The Mad Millionaire seemed to have scarcely ten steps the start of the others; and yet he made such good use of his advantage that he caught Belle up in his arms, rushed with her to his waiting wagon, fairly threw her in, followed himself, and was off as if riding on the hurricane.

The excitement of the struggle seemed to set fire to his distempered brain. He yelled to his horses, and shrieked with maniac laughter as, standing erect, he swung the long lash of his whip round and round and sent it darting through the air, to crack over the heads of his frightened beasts like a rifle-shot.

They were used to this wild driving; but the snow blinded them, and the roar and rush of mighty winds maddened them, and they tore through the blackness unable to see the ground they trod on or any surrounding objects, and kept in the road only by some subtle animal instinct of which human reason can give no account.

They were running away, with no one to check them but that madman, who reveled in their wildest speed, reckless of the destruction they might be rushing upon.

Belle, forgetful of all else but present peril, clung to the sides of the bounding vehicle, fearing every moment that it would be overturned and she hurled to a horrible death by mangling!

The blind instinct of fear made her shriek for help where there was no chance for it from human hands; and so they rushed on through the blackness and icy chill!

Down through the village they swept, with ever-increasing speed; then away toward the crags where dwelt the old crone, whom all had that night come to fear as a veritable emissary of the Evil One!

And now the hissing lightning rent the black

curtain of night, and the voice of the mighty Thod, the god of thunder, drowned the eerie shrieks of laughter of the imps of the tempest.

Directly in their path the mad horses saw an object of hideous aspect.

Her bent form, her flapping garments, the crooked staff she waved, shrieking:

"Ha! ha! ha! Come on to death! Come on to the mangling rocks! Come on where chasms yawn and crags lie in wait! Come on, to perish in the snow and cold! Come on! come on! I welcome ye! Ha-ha-a-a-a-ah! The curses I've scattered like the sower in seedtime are springing up, a rare crop of the thorns and nettles of hell! Now shriek and wail and pray to yer deaf Heaven! I answer ye! Fall to, my lads! Let every man strike his brother to the heart! Writhe in the death-grip! Strain yer muscles till yer thews and sinews crack! Grind the hoarse curse between yer gnashing teeth! Ho! ho! we'll have the fiends' revel!"

This horrid spectacle appearing in their path as if it had started out of the earth caused the frantic leaders to rear and paw the air, then swerve sharply to one side; and in a flash the vehicle slewed round and rolled over and over, hurling the yelling madman and his shrieking victim to an invisible fate.

The wagon lay a wreck. The horses, broken loose, coursed madly on into the darkness, the winds sweeping the clatter of their hoofs away.

The unearthly cries of the insane driver ceased abruptly, as did the terrified voice of poor Belle Briggs.

Amid the bellowing of the thunder, the roaring of the winds, and the crash of riven trees, no sound of living creature remained save the eerie strains of the witch's voice, screaming:

"Ha! ha! ho! ho! The dead man's bones—dead by the hand of hate!—works the fierce will of the Tormentor! Blow ye bleak blasts out from the frozen pole! The touch of yer breath is death! Fall ye dread bolts from the pitiless heaven! The wrath of the gods sears and blackens as it destroys! Scourge with yer scorpion whips the vile earth-worm, man! Bring revenge! revenge! revenge! to the witch they fear while they hate!"

CHAPTER V.

A FRUITLESS SEARCH.

THE struggle for the capture of Belle Briggs was a brief one.

Satisfied of her escape from her human foes, Little Leather-Breeches awoke to her peril from the violence of nature and the eccentricity of the madman. So, shaking himself free from his assailants, he slipped away.

With no one to fight and nothing to fight for, the icy blast soon cooled the ardor of the crowd.

Blinded by the snow, shivering and with their teeth chattering, those who were not called to the task of bearing the dead man scuttled to the house.

The minister staid by poor Abe, urging gentleness upon those who lifted him, lest some flickering of life might hold him to suffering, and so advanced himself in the respect of those who had looked upon him as rather effeminate.

To spare the women the shock of that bloody horror, the body was carried to the granary, where, a lantern having been lighted, the minister once more knelt and satisfied himself that life was indeed extinct.

Then they went to the house, to find a woman quivering with terror, yet ready to do battle with a mother's undaunted courage.

It was Mrs. Briggs, who, having been upstairs, was ignorant of what had occurred, until the breaking of the storm frightened her into joining those below, where she learned the terrible suspicitions that blanched all faces.

"What is this I am told?" she cried—"that my daughter has taken the blood of a fellow-creature on her hands! Who has started this monstrous slander? Why don't you speak?"

She had been a quiet woman—a woman of many sorrows and gentle resignation. But now her low voice was high and ringing; her kindly eyes blazed; her hand, that had soothed many an aching brow was clinched.

Farmer Ashmead dropped his eyes. He had been her friend for twenty years and more—ever since she was a light-hearted girl no older than Belle!

The minister came to his relief.

"My dear friend!" he said, endeavoring to take her hand.

But she shrunk from him.

"I want no soft words!" she cried. "You cannot caress me with one hand and stab me with the other! Are you all my child's accusers? Tell me that!"

"Madame, she is her own accuser!"

"Her own accuser?"

"We found her kneeling beside the dead man, and she called herself his murderer!"

"But it cannot be true! She was beside herself with terror! She could not have killed him with her own hand! Great God, men! you who have known her ever since her babyhood!—you who know that she never harmed a living thing in all her innocent life!—you cannot believe that she would suddenly develop into such a wretch—such a monster! You know that he was fond of her—everybody knows that—a poor simple creature, good and kindly enough in his way, but not one to win the favor of such a girl as Belle. She may have told him so, and he in a moment of despair, have made way with himself. Men have done such things. Then what more natural than that, in her terror and sorrow at what had happened, through her and yet leaving her without blame, she should call herself his murderer—meaning that she had driven him to it? Oh! it must be that!—it is that, and no other!"

"That was her defense afterwards, but—"

"She said it? she said it?" screamed the mother, leaping toward him as if about to clasp his arm, and yet shrinking back before her hands touched him. "Now God be praised!"

Then turning to her friends and neighbors, with clasped hands and streaming eyes:

"You hear! you hear! She is innocent!"

But with gentle dignity the minister recounted the facts as they had been witnessed, from the first appearance of Abe Seaver to the picking up of the revolver known to belong to Belle.

The mother listened at bay, her lips apart, her breath panting, her eyes hard with defiant incredulity.

"It is not true!" she persisted. "If all the prophets of Israel were to appear before me and declare her guilt, I would not believe them! I know her better. Where is she? What have you done with her?"

"With the aid of your son, she was carried off by the Mad Millionaire."

"Will did it? Well, now, I am truly proud of him! It is not the first time he has protected a defenseless woman from your heartless cruelty!"

The men winced as she laughed in their faces.

But then a wild blast swept round the house, causing it to fairly rock, and the snow beat against the windows as if it were being thrown by the shovel.

"In mercy's name!" cried the mother, now awaking to the other peril, "is it possible that you drove a helpless girl into such a night as this? Where were your hearts—you who are fathers with daughters of your own?"

"It was not our doing," said farmer Ashmead. "She was snatched out of our hands by your son and an irresponsible lunatic, whom—"

"Where are my things?" cried the indignant mother. "May God forgive you all for your iron hearts—I never will!"

She got her shawl and bonnet, refusing to listen to the women who crowded about her, begging her not to go out into that terrible tempest.

As she entered the kitchen Joe Weyby stepped forward, saying:

"If you're bound to go, you don't go alone."

"It's low down, and that's a fact, for a lot of hulking fellows like us to pitch onto a little girl!" cried Jake Winters. "Mrs. Briggs, if you will count me on your side, I'll be obliged to ye!"

The infection of sympathy took rapidly among the young men, though the older and less susceptible held out in unforgiving condemnation. Murder was murder!

Half a dozen stalwart fellows soon had their coats buttoned up to their chins and their caps drawn down over their ears, and with a young giant supporting her on either side, Mrs. Briggs went out into the storm.

They took her home, and then set out with lanterns to look for Belle.

The regular "stool-pigeons" were sitting lazily about the stove in Tuttle's grocery, smoking his tobacco and "swapping lies."

"I sw'ar!" drawled Sam Trueman, stretching lazily, "I begin to think we're goin' to have a rough night to git home in."

"Pity we didn't start an hour ago," assented Andy Morrison, as the frame building shuddered under the buffets of the wind.

"Who ever knowed it to blow up such a blizzard without a minute's warning?"

Old-man Van Dyke remembered a similar case in '37; and drawing a black plug from his breeches pocket, and biting off a piece, he pro-

Little Leather-Breeches.

ceeded to tell all about it, making it as much worse than the present storm as his imagination would permit.

In the midst of his description they were startled by a series of yells, the clatter of hoofs and rattling of wheels, and the screams of a woman.

"Good heavens! what's that?"

They sprung to the door, to be blinded and have their breath taken away by the fierce assaults of the elements.

The light streaming through the door showed them a runaway team tearing by.

"The Mad Millionaire!"

"With a woman in the wagon! Who can it be?"

"Whoever it is, her life ain't worth two bits, out in a night like this!"

"We can't stand hyer an' let her perish?"

"What's the reason we can't? The man that goes out in that blow had better git measured fur his coffin! That's my advice!"

While they stood debating the question, a dark object was seen to approach.

It was some one staggering through the snow, swept now this way, now that, by the furious blasts.

"Look! he's down!"

"Lend a hand till we snake him in hyer!"

They rushed out, caught the fallen man by the shoulders, and set him on his feet.

"Hyer, friend! we'll soon have you in a more comfortable berth than this!"

"Van,"—which was short for Van Dyke—"you're just the man I want to see!"

"Haloo! it's Little Leather-Breeches! What in Cain air you doin' out hyer?"

"That's you, Morrison, is it? And who's this?"

"Sam Trueman, an' don't ye furgit it! But I wouldn't 'a' b'lieved you'd knock under, the little while this blizzard has been blowin'—hang me ef I would!"

"It ain't that," gasped Little Leather-Breeches, as they dragged him over the threshold, "but I've had an ugly wrench. I reckon it has nearly broke me in two!"

"What you're wantin' is three fingers o' rum," said Old-man Van Dyke, with unswerving faith in his universal remedy. "That'll set you all right in no time."

"What I want," said Little Leather-Breeches to Deacon Tuttle, "is every lantern you can scare up, and a good man each to carry them."

In a word he told them, not the whole truth, but that the Mad Millionaire had taken Belle in his wagon and made off with her from the gathering at Ashmead's.

As they hustled about, each knowing where to get what was wanted as well as the proprietor himself, they made the natural demand:

"And whar's *they* all? Hain't they got no lanterns up to Ashmead's?"

"They may be along presently. But every minute counts in such a night as this, so I hurried on for you fellows."

"And right you was! You're sure to find us at the old stand!"

"Come, then!"

"Hold on! We don't start without somethin' warmin'! I've seen more days than you have, boy. Give the old man credit fur knowin' a feetele somethin'!"

They drank all round, while Little Leather-Breeches waited impatiently at the door.

"Now, then!" he cried, as they approached, throwing open the door and leaping out.

Old-man Van Dyke muttered something about youngsters, and followed less agilely.

They went up the road as fast as they could make their way through the deepening snow and against the swirling wind.

Little Leather-Breeches could not step without pain, for in his tussle he had received a bruise and wrench of the leg; but he kept on without murmuring.

Two or three times all of their lanterns were blown out at the same time, and they were left in total darkness. Then one had to take his lantern under his overcoat while another lighted it.

So they reached the scene of the overturning of the wagon of the Mad Millionaire.

"Hyer's something!" cried one.

It was the vehicle already half-drifted over.

"Blow me if it takes long to cover things up hyer! Hyer's the wagon, but neither hide nor hair of any livin' critter!"

"Hold on! Hyer's somebody! Dash the light! Hold yer lantern hyer, Sam."

"It's a man—the Mad Millionaire!"

"He was pitched out when the wagon went over. It's knocked him as stiff as a sledge-stake!"

"It's lucky for him that he wasn't pitched

over a cliff! Has it fixed him for good and all?"

"But Belle Briggs!" interposed Little Leather-Breeches. "Boys, tramp around here lively! She must be under the snow!"

But no trace of her was found.

"She must have been able to walk off," said Andy Morrison.

"But she could not go far. Belle! Belle! Belle!"

And Little Leather-Breeches shouted her name at the top of his lungs.

No response came.

The others joined him in a united halloo, with the same depressing result.

"She may have been thrown out somewhere along the way," said Little Leather-Breeches, his heart sinking at the thought.

"Look a-hyer," suggested Old-man Van Dyke. "The witch's hut oughtn't to be so very fur off. She might 'a' made her way thar."

Our hero caught at this hope.

They toiled forward up the steep to the witch's hut.

There were no windows in the hut: but the door was so ill-fitted that a ruddy glow of a brilliant fire shone through the chinks.

"Hallo within!" cried Little Leather-Breeches, rapping on the door, which was all the worse for the rude entry of the mob a few weeks before.

"What d'ye want?" was the querulous demand. "Can't ye let a poor lone woman bide in peace? Stay where ye are, with the curse of old Mumbo Jumbo, who has nothing to thank you for but ill-usage!"

"You have to thank me that you have a roof over your head at all," replied Little Leather-Breeches. "Come! open to us! All we want is to ask you a few questions."

The old beldam hobbled across the room, opened the door, and muttering inaudibly all the time, turned her back on her guests, and hobbled back to the fire, where she crouched for warmth.

"Have you seen anything of a young girl—Belle Briggs?" asked Little Leather-Breeches, glancing about, though he knew that there was no place in the hut where she could be secreted.

"What! the accursed one?" asked the old witch, glaring around at him, "she with the blood on her soul?"

The men stared. They had heard the gossip about the woful prophecy. But now they saw Little Leather-Breeches turn ghastly pale, and shudder.

Old Mumbo Jumbo sprung up, and seizing her staff, waved him off with it, crying:

"Avant, with yer names of evil omen! Have ye come here to darken my threshold and bring down the wrath of heaven on me? Go! go! go!"

She advanced upon him menacingly.

"Take yer bloody tracks from my door!" she shouted, so shrilly that the men retreated before her, with a superstitious thrill.

"For God's sake, let us git out o' hyer!" cried Old-man Van Dyke. "Thar's nothing to be got in this accursed place but ill-luck!"

It was enough for Little Leather-Breeches that he despaired of finding Belle there.

"Come!" he said. "We must seek her along the road. She must have been thrown out before the wagon overturned! My God! what will become of her? Belle! Belle! my darling!"

The last he whispered to himself, in an agony of despair.

They began the search, kicking about in the snow and shouting her name.

There was no hope of success. It was impossible to remain longer out in the cold. They were already becoming chilled and exhausted. How could they search on either side of the road for a mile for an object buried out of sight?

Only Little Leather-Breeches persisted in it, the others relieving each other in carrying the Mad Millionaire.

Soon the boy became so exhausted that he had to be helped, and finally carried.

So they met another party, the young men who had escorted Mrs. Briggs home and then gone forth in quest of her daughter.

Hearing the report of those who had already gone over the ground, they were disheartened.

By Joe Weyby's urging they went a little further, but soon abandoned the hopeless task.

"It'll save the hangman a mighty disagreeable task!" remarked Jake Winters, gloomily. "We'll find her to-morrow, looking better than she would with her neck stretched!"

Little Leather-Breeches was carried home, where Mrs. Briggs went almost wild over her accumulated sorrows.

When the young men returned to farmer Ashmead's with their report, Kate contracted her eyes with shrewd suspicion,

"It's odd that they should find Mr. Barclay, and not Belle," she said. "Where could she have gone, if she escaped unhurt? Suppose Will Fosdick got Tuttle's crowd to help him spirit her off?"

"That's more like it!" John Boyce assented.

The matter was discussed until everybody was half-convinced.

On the morrow a new complication arose. Abe Seaver's body had disappeared!

There were half-filled tracks in the snow under the lee of the granary; but where the wind had a fair sweep they were wholly obliterated.

When informed of this, the minister stared blankly, turning alternately red and pale.

"Can it be that we made a mistake, and he is yet alive?" he exclaimed. "If he has gone out in the storm in delirium and perished, I shall never hold myself free from blame!"

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Ashmead to her husband, when they were alone, "did you ever see such a soft heart? I shouldn't wonder if he worried himself sick, if Abe is found dead in the snow!"

"Boys," was a ruder, yet not less hearty comment, "that person is no slouch! I thought the wind would saw me in two when we stood over Abe—an' I ain't no chicken!—an' thar that preacher took it like a little man!"

CHAPTER VI.

A LIVING GRAVE!

WHEN Belle Briggs awoke to consciousness, she found herself in total darkness.

The air about her was damp and had the chill of the grave in it.

"Oh! I am blind! I cannot see a ray of light! And how dead and heavy the air is!"

She had struggled to a sitting posture. She now passed her hand over the surface of the ground, and found that it was sand.

"It is the shore of a lake or river. But I cannot hear the ripple of water. And this profound darkness!—it cannot be night. There is not the faintest glimmer of light!"

She strained her eyes to their widest extent, without avail.

"No! no! I am stone blind! Oh heaven! I shall never see again! What can have happened to me?"

"That fearful ride! I must have been thrown over a cliff, and the shock has paralyzed the optic nerve.

"But I must have help! I shall perish out here alone, without shelter or food, and unable to move a step without the fear of being dashed to death!

"But if I return to men, it will be to be hanged! Why did I not tell some one when I discovered that I had lost my revolver at the picnic? Now, no one will believe it!"

Still, where there is life there must be effort. She rose and began to grope about.

Sliding one foot before her as she advanced, as a precaution against pitfalls, her extended hands presently came in contact with the cold, damp, rough surface of a rock. It was sheer as high as she could reach. It must be the wall of a canyon.

Putting her back against it, she strode directly forward at right angles.

"One! two! three! four! five! six! seven! eight! nine! ten! eleven! twelve! thir—"

Her foot struck an obstruction; her hands felt a wall like that she had just left.

She shuddered at the fatal number thirteen!

She proceeded along the wall, keeping one hand in contact with it. It was somewhat toruous, yet bore, as far as she could judge, in the same general direction.

She tried to remember any canyon like this. There was a mountain gulch about a mile from her home, not far from the hut of the old witch, which at this season was for the most part a "dry run."

"But what has become of the snow? If it melted while I lay unconscious, the water-course should now be a rushing torrent."

While she reflected thus, she experienced that sensation of proximity which we have all felt in the dark when the face or head is brought near an extended surface.

It was the echo of her breathing against the rocky walls.

This attracted her attention more particularly to the sense of hearing, and she became conscious that her slightest movement was echoed, not in distinct repetitions, but as if the reflecting surfaces were so close that the original sound blended with the reduplication.

Her imagination caught at this, and exaggerated it. She stopped in sudden fright. To her excited fancy it seemed as if the walls that encompassed her were closing in about her.

On a sudden impulse she shrieked at the top of her voice:

"Help!"

The effect was terrifying—stupefying! It was as if her wild cry had filled the whole world—as if a thousand fiends shrieked the word back into her ears!

She cowered to the ground, quivering in every nerve.

"And, oh, God! I am blind! blind!"

That was the especial terror of it. She could not see the danger that menaced her.

But continued observation impressed her with the dead stillness of the air, which equaled the silence. It was not the free air of heaven, which always has some motion, so that the cheek can feel a faint coolness.

Then flashed upon her a revelation which caused her heart to leap with a thrill of delight such as she had never before experienced.

"I am not blind! no! no! I am not blind! Thank God! I shall live to see again the blue sky and the green fields and the golden sunshine!"

And with a wild sob of ecstasy she scooped up a handful of sand, leaped to her feet, and threw it into the air.

Then she uttered a scream of delight.

"It struck! it struck! I heard it distinctly!"

To make assurance doubly sure, she threw several handfuls more, crying as she did so:

"No! no! I am not blind! The rock extends overhead! I am underground! I am in a cave! That accounts for this rayless darkness! Oh! I shall see! I shall see!"

She had been in caves before, thinking it great sport to explore them with candles, shrinking at each step with fear, though assured by her companions that a few steps more would fetch them to the end, when they could turn about and go back to the renewed beauty of the sunlit world.

"Even in the darkness I have only to follow along the wall," she assured herself. "If one way does not lead out, the other will. So I am perfectly safe."

She now hastened, moving as rapidly as she dared, with the necessary caution to avoid striking against some obstruction.

"When I come to where I can go no further, I shall know that I am in the wrong direction, and can turn back," she said, striving to thus fortify her courage.

So she groped forward through numberless windings, until the roof dropped so that she could no longer walk erect.

"Yes! yes!" she panted; "this is what I expected. There is no use in going any further in that direction. That is the end of the cave. Now I have only to follow the wall back. I suppose I was near the entrance when I set out, and taking the wrong direction, have been walking away from it ever since. Of course I couldn't have been far from the mouth."

This reflection started a new train of thought.

"But how did I get in here at all, I wonder?"

But that question opened up such a dark vista of uncertainty that she feared to explore it.

"One thing at a time," she said, trying to laugh. "When I find my way out, it will be time enough to ascertain how I got in."

She groped on and on for what seemed to her to be hours, though she assured herself again and again that of course that was an illusion born of anxiety—that it was, in fact, only minutes.

Then it occurred to her that she ought to try to recall the irregularities of the way, to assure herself that she was retracing the path she had come.

"And here I am going back with my left hand to the wall, as I came. That is to say, I am following the opposite side. How thoughtless!"

And yet it sprung from the natural desire to have the right hand free to grope with, while using the left hand as a guide, which only required to be kept in contact with the wall.

With quickening heart, she immediately crossed over.

And now rose a treacherous play of the imagination.

One moment she thought that she had come upon some remembered landmark, but the next it all seemed strange.

"It is the strangeness of using my right hand, and of approaching the irregularities from the opposite direction," she said, hurrying forward, and using both hands.

Then she turned her attention to the footway.

"It seems to be rougher," she mused. "But then it was broken in some places."

Presently it occurred to her to turn round and go in the opposite direction.

"I need go but a few steps," she said aloud, feeling a growing terror at the thought of losing a moment. "It will relieve me of this awful uncertainty. I cannot endure it another moment! O-o-oh—"

It was a quavering moan of terror; but she broke it off.

"No! no!" she whispered to herself, "I must not yield—I must be calm! The danger is in losing presence of mind and self-control. I will be collected!"

She struggled heroically against the terror that was bearing down upon her, threatening to destroy all power of rational thought.

With quaking knees she groped a few steps, her trembling hands feeling every inequality of the rocky wall.

"Yes! yes!" she said, "I recall this crevice. I remember that it hurt my finger when it slipped into it."

But the fact was, her fevered imagination was beginning to people the darkness with undefined shapes of horror. The place where the wall had dropped until it touched her head seemed to be creeping toward her like a living thing!

"Yes! yes!" she whispered, hoarsely and turning, hurried so precipitately that she stumbled and hurt herself, yet kept on with increasing eagerness.

Presently she ran against an abrupt wall. It was another terminus.

"This is the real end of the cave!" she said to herself, breathlessly. "Where the roof shut down must have been the opening. I should have gone as far as possible before turning back. But it is not too late yet. I can return."

She hurried back, now stumbling and running against projections, yet on and on, heedless of the cruel bruises she received.

For a little while she would follow one wall and then cross over to the other, with a fickleness of purpose which came of growing confusion.

In one of these passages she found herself in an open space. Then everything seemed to whirl round, and she lost all sense of direction, and groped about aimlessly.

Then she cried aloud for help until the weird echoes frightened her into silence.

But the sounds did not die with her voice. The silences thus waked gave back fiendish, chuckling laughter.

Horror froze the blood in her veins. She fled blindly, madly.

She rushed against a wall, and fell, stunned and bleeding.

She gathered herself up, and with her head spinning round and her knees tottering dragged herself on! on! on! whither she knew not.

So, overcome with terror and exhaustion, she sunk to the ground and lay unconscious.

From her swoon she passed directly into a profound sleep.

When exhausted nature had thus recuperated, she woke slowly, feeling chilled and stiff and sore.

She lay utterly hopeless, until her idly-roving glance chanced to range directly above her head.

There she saw what thrilled her to her heart's core—a gleam of light! a ray of heaven's glad sunshine!

She sprang to her feet, and shrieked:

"Help! help! help! oh, help! Is there none of God's free creatures within the reach of my voice? Help! help! help!—in the name of heaven, help!"

But even as she appealed to it, extending her arms in wild supplication, that faint, far-off beacon was blotted out.

"It was a delusion! I am going mad!" she cried, clasping her head in her hands.

Then the chamber, in the center of which she had fallen and now stood despairing, echoed with a wild unnatural laugh.

"Ha! ha! ha-a-a-ah! ha! ha! So you are there, are you? Come up, you little devils! come up! come up! I've been waiting for you and trying to spy you out for years and years! Are you there? Come up and show yourselves! Nobody'll harm you!"

"I'm mad! I'm mad!" breathed the poor girl, her cup of misery now full.

CHAPTER VII.

A VOICE IN THE DARK.

BUT there was no escaping from the importunity of the voice which rung in her ears.

"I say, brownies, ghouls, hobgoblins, elves, fairies, whoever and whatever you are, you needn't be afraid of me. I've always had a fancy for you, and I wouldn't mind an exchange of civilities, all in a friendly way, if you are

agreeable. Ha! ha! I'm an odd Dick, myself; so you needn't stand on ceremony with me."

The bewildered girl brushed her hand across her brow, listening as the voice rattled on.

It sounded strange and muffled, and was so multiplied by the echoes that it defied every effort to determine where it came from, though she turned her head in different directions.

Still, that it spoke intelligibly gave it a certain human quality; and when it ceased she called tremulously:

"Is it a fellow-creature that is addressing me?"

"Ha! ha! ha-a-a-ah! ha! ha!" it shrieked, so wildly that the frightened girl cowered and shuddered as she listened. "That's a good one! Ha! ha! ha-a-a-ah! ha! ha! A fellow-creature! I should say not! I'm about fourteen times as tall as you are, and weigh at least a hundred times as much. I say! do you know that I eat more beef every day for dinner than your whole body would make? But then you needn't be afraid of me. I'm not hungry just now. Ha! ha! ha! ha! But there! that's chaff. If you only knew it, I'm the best friend you little folks have got. And I'm a right jolly fellow when you once come to know me. Won't you let me see you? Do you live down there without any light?"

"Surely, surely this is delirium!" moaned poor Belle. "But my strait is so desperate that I must not lose the most unpromising hope of succor.

"Who are you?" she asked aloud.

"I'm the modern Rip Van Winkle! You remember Rip? He hobnobbed with some of your folks years ago. But he wasn't a jollier fellow than I am! Just try me! Won't you come up and let me see you?"

"God knows I cannot escape!" sighed poor Belle.

"Can't escape? Why, what's the matter? I thought you folks could go anywhere you wanted to—down into the ground, or up into the air, just for the wishing. What can't you escape from?"

"From this living tomb!"

"Oh! you're in a tomb, are you? Well, that's queer! Do you bury your folks alive? We bury our folks that way sometimes. Ha! ha! But then it's a bad way to plant 'em, so we try not to, as a rule. You see, they can't come up, like carrots and such, and they don't like to stay down! That's a matter of taste, though. Do you know?—I fancy I shouldn't mind being buried alive. But I'd want a trap-door, so that I could come up o' nights and skirmish around in the church-yard, and make folks's hair rise! Wouldn't that be a rig to run? But, say! you don't seem to enjoy that sort of thing, do you? I wish I could help you out. I like to make everybody comfortable, I do. Oh! I'm a right good fellow, as I told you, when you come to know me!"

"Oh! can you not help me? I am lost in this horrible place! If you would but lead me once more to the light of the sun, I would give you a life-long gratitude!"

"Well, that is queer! Ain't all of your folks down there with you?"

"My folks? How should they be? Oh, no!—I am entirely alone!"

"They've gone off and left you, have they? Well, that just shows! I reckon all mortals are pretty much alike, though I did think that nothing could quite equal the scalawags we have on top of the earth! I say!—I can't do much for you myself. I'm a no-account fellow with a crick in my cranium, so they say. But I know a young chap that's greased lightning on things that nobody else can do; and if you don't mind waiting a bit, I'll have him here in two jerks of a lamb's tail. He'll fetch you through, you may depend!"

In a clear, rational moment Belle would have known that this was human help, and would have sent word to her friends. But in her half-delirious state she was like one in a dream, who is not surprised at meeting the weird creations of superstitious fancy.

"Oh! if you can send one to my aid," she sighed, "I will be ever grateful to you."

"All right! Here goes! Keep your heart up until I get back! Ha! ha! ha-a-a-ah! ha! ha! That's a good one, that is! I wonder what the little cuss is like, anyway!"

The concluding sentences did not reach Belle's ears. The last she heard was the dying away of the demoniac laughter.

The voice did not seem to recede in the corridors of the cave, but ceased as if it vanished out of the air close to her. So once more she told herself that it was a cheat of the imagination.

"It cannot be that there are spirits other than

Little Leather-Breeches.

human souls," she said, struggling to keep the mastery of her reason. "Nor am I asleep and dreaming. No! no! it is the flightiness which comes of weakness."

She sought to steady herself. If she only had something to fix her eyes upon. She recalled the gleam of light, and looked to see if it would reappear.

Yes! there it was again! and though she believed it an illusion and that it would presently vanish as it had done before, she gazed at it as a castaway on the lone ocean stares at a dim speck on the horizon, which may prove to be a sail, or only a film of vapor which will shortly dissipate in the air.

"But it is blue!" she suddenly cried aloud. "And see! there is a point of light in the middle of it! It is the sky—it is the blue sky! I have heard that, looking up from the bottom of a well, one can see stars in the daytime! Yes! yes! it is no illusion, but a glorious reality! I see the sailing heavens once more, and that is my star of promise!"

A wild ecstasy thrilled through and through her. A flood of grateful tears sprung to her eyes. She dashed them away, lest for an instant she should lose sight of that shimmering point of hope.

So there, on her knees in the darkness, with her hands clasped as in prayer and her eyes straining upward, she waited, panting and sobbing and murmuring—

"Oh God! you are good to me! You will send deliverance in your own time and way!"

While she waits thus, let us explain the source of the voice with which she has been holding converse.

The blizzard having blown itself out by midnight was followed before morning by a furious rain-storm, which washed away every trace of snow.

At dawn two parties went in search of Belle Briggs—one consisting of her friends, and the other of the vindicators of the law.

The distracted mother insisted upon being one of the former party, and as her despair increased with the evidence that there was no trace of Belle to be found, she toiled among the crags, frantically crying her name until she was carried home completely exhausted.

Those under the lead of Jason Ashmead met with no better success, and both parties were equally jeered by old Mumbo Jumbo.

Meanwhile, almost himself again after a night's rest, Little Leather-Breeches had gone out alone, resolved if he found the girl alive to take her beyond the reach of the law at all hazards.

Apparently little the worse for his fall, the Mad Millionaire had gone in search of his runaway horses.

By the middle of the afternoon he had not met with any better success than the others in their more important quest; but his fortune took him into the heart of the hills, where, as he was about to step over a hole upon which he had come unexpectedly, he heard issuing up through it the muffled sounds of a human voice.

His diseased imagination at once caught at this, a glance into the black orifice showing him that it was the opening into some subterranean chamber.

"Ho! it's brownies!" he cried, eagerly. "I've wanted to see them all my life. Now's as good a time as any to make their acquaintance. I'll speak to them!"

So he knelt and thrust his face close down over the hole, entirely cutting off the light that streamed through it.

He rose from his interview with Belle believing that it was some underground spirit in trouble, and went in quest of Little Leather-Breeches.

He did not find Will Fosdick at home, but the distracted mother sat rocking her body to and fro, or paced the floor, or was now and then forced to lie down for a few minutes by the sympathetic women who surrounded her.

At sight of the Mad Millionaire, she sprung up and seized hold of him.

"What have you done with my child?" she screamed. "Where is she? You were with her last! You tore her away from all who loved her! Where is she now?"

The lunatic took the contagion of her excitement as tinder ignites from a spark.

"Yes! yes! yes!" he cried with the rapidity of lightning, fairly dancing. "That was a famous ride, with the devil at the end of it! Ha! ha!"

"You fiend!" cried the mother, enraged at his laughter, so that she shook him with all her strength.

"But I say!" he cried, "where's Little

Leather-Breeches? He's the man for my money! Say!" and he lowered his voice to a mysterious whisper, "don't you give it away; but— Eh? You understand?"

And winking and bobbing his head rapidly, he poked her in the side with his finger, with a knowing look, and throwing back his head, shrieked out his wild laugh once more.

Then glancing around at the other women who shrank from him with fear, he sidled up to her and whispered in her ear:

"It's all right, between you and me and the graveyard. Little Leather-Breeches is the best man in the country. Eh? he's the one to fix it all right!"

Then the mother began to tremble with a wild hope. She too suddenly became apprehensive of the women, as seizing him with both hands she whispered back:

"You have found—"

"Ha! ha! ha!" he shrieked, throwing his head back, and then winking and nudging her again, added: "What some folks would give their eye-teeth to find! But, m'mn's the word! Where's Little Leather-Breeches? I can't manage it myself, what with the crick in my head, you know."

"God bless you, you faithful creature!" sobbed the mother, overcome with the new hope. "Oh, be careful! Do not trust any one. They are all her enemies! Do not even let it be known that you are in search of Will, or you may be followed. But you will find him somewhere among the hills. You must search unceasingly until you do find him."

So, "building better than he knew," he left the mother with a priceless boon of joy and gratitude, while he went back to the hills.

The sun had almost touched the horizon when he came upon the object of his search, looking haggard and desperate.

"Hello!" he cried. "You're just the chap I'm looking for. I say!—I haven't found the horses yet, but I've found what I've never lost. Ha! ha! ha! You don't believe in witches and devils and fairies, do you? Well, there's the witch over yonder among the crags. You can't deny that she told you all this trouble about the murder beforehand; and it's my opinion that she had a hand in it. It would be an easy matter for her to make you all believe that Abe Seaver was shot, when it wasn't him at all, but only one of her familiars that had taken the form of his body, and lay there as if he was dead. You see, she couldn't spirit off a real body, but if it was a cheat, I reckon it vanished before Ashmead and the rest of them had got half-way to the house."

"If that isn't the business of a witch, I don't know what is."

"As for devils, you can see them dancing in the fire any stormy night, and hear them shrieking and laughing down the chimney."

"But now, I've got something else to show you—something that you don't get a chance to see every day. I've been on the lookout for them all my life, and this is the first time I ever had the ghost of a show to get at one of them."

"We're all very independent when we're all right, ain't we? But when we get into trouble, we're glad of some one who will help us out."

"And now, who do you think has got into a hole— Ha, ha, ha! That's a good one. Into a hole! Ha! ha! ha-a-a-ha! ha! ha!"

"Look here, Barclay!" said Will, wearily, "I haven't any time to listen to your nonsense! What has become of Belle Briggs? That's what I want to know."

"Oh, yes! Belle Briggs. It was queer about that, wasn't it? I wouldn't have believed she had it in her. She was always so quiet, you know. But then you can never tell."

Little Leather-Breeches turned away in despair.

"But, say!" continued the Mad Millionaire, following him up. "You're a good fellow. You'd help anybody out of a scrape, wouldn't you? Well, I've found a fairy shut up in a tomb under ground. Her folks have actually buried her alive—I don't know what for; she didn't tell me. But there she is, and she asked me to help her out. That's the queerest thing I ever heard. I always thought that these ground folk could come and go as they pleased, and that they preferred to stay down there. But I suppose she knows best whether she feels comfortable. So I told her that my head-piece wasn't good for much, but I knew a likely young fellow who would be glad to render her any services that lay in his power; and that if he couldn't find a way of getting her out, there was no use in looking to any one else. So I've come for you. Now's your chance to see a

regular fairy. I thought you wouldn't want to miss the sight. I never saw one before, myself."

"Barclay," said Little Leather-Breeches; "come, be a good fellow and try to think what happened after you left Jason Ashmead's house with Miss Briggs."

It was plain that he was not impressed by what he considered one of the madman's vagaries.

But the Mad Millionaire was full of his one idea, and he urged it with every argument he could think of, going over the details of his interview when Little Leather-Breeches showed his incredulity, until our hero, impatient at having this nonsense, as he supposed, thrust upon his grief, repelled him angrily, and shook him off.

But soon after he was alone something that had been said came back with startling force. His attention once arrested, the whole situation suddenly flashed upon him in a new light, and he stopped abruptly with a cry of wonder.

The next instant he was flying back toward the spot where he had left the madman, shouting his name at the top of his lungs.

The Mad Millionaire quickly forgot his disappointment, and delightedly led Little Leather-Breeches to the crevice in the rock.

Trembling in every limb, our hero knelt with the setting sun shining full in his face.

He had not time to speak, when a wild cry came up from the opening.

"Will! Will! oh, Will! thank God, you have come at last!"

CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNKNOWN FATE.

WITH his heart in his mouth, Little Leather-Breeches asked:

"Belle, darling, is it you?"

"Yes! yes!" she panted. "Oh, Will, I have nearly died of fright!"

"Well, it is all over now," he said, soothingly.

"Oh, I am sure it is, now that I have you with me."

"But how did you get down there in so strange a place?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"Try to think. You were with the Mad Millionaire, you know."

"Yes. I shudder at that fearful ride! But I do not remember how it ended. I must have lost consciousness. When I came to myself I was in this terrible place all alone!"

"I think you were thrown from the wagon."

"That may be. I feel bruised and sore."

"Then you must have got up in a half-conscious state and sought shelter from the cold in the mouth of some cave. But I do not know of anything of the kind anywhere near our home. Do you?"

"No."

"However, the first thing to think about is how to get you out. Can't you find your way out as you got in?"

"Oh, no! I have wandered about in the darkness until I am nearly wild! This is the only gleam of light I have seen since I have been in this horrible place!"

"Well, we must try some other way."

Little Leather-Breeches reflected.

"Belle," he said, after a pause, "you need not suffer any more anxiety, for now that I know where you are, you are perfectly safe. But it will be impossible to get you out at once. You cannot be got up through this small opening, nor can I get to you. And it is probable that, with a light and proper means of keeping track of the ground you have gone over, you can find the way out much sooner than I could find the way in to you."

"But first, you must be hungry."

"I have been too greatly frightened to think of hunger, though I am weak and faint for want of food. But I am famishing with thirst! If you could get me some water first!"

"You will not be afraid to be left alone?"

"Oh, no!"

"Well, I will be back as soon as possible."

He rose, to find the Mad Millionaire staring at him in wonder.

Little Leather-Breeches felt that it would be safer to leave the lunatic in his delusion than to tell him the truth.

He therefore got rid of him on the pretext that he had frightened the fairy by his wild laugh, and with the promise that, when he had got her out, and she had got used to human beings so as not to fear them, he would tell her who her rescuer was and ask her to let him see her.

The Mad Millionaire thereupon resumed the

search for his horses, and our hero got water in a flask in which he always carried spirits for use in emergency, and dropped it through the opening, so that Belle could catch it in the lap of her dress.

In the same way he gave his match-safe and materials with which to build a fire.

Then he left her, to get food and the means of effecting her escape.

Rushing home as fast as he could through the gathering twilight, he found his mother by adoption surrounded by several sympathizing neighbors.

By his instruction she got rid of them with a woman's nice tact.

They doubtless suspected that something lay beneath this polite invitation to leave, but they went, expressing their sympathy.

Then Mrs. Briggs bustled about getting warm clothes for Belle, while Little Leather-Breeches put up food and candles and a ball of twine.

She plied him with a flood of questions, but he told her indefinitely that he had found Belle hiding in a cave where she was safe from pursuit.

He packed everything in a long bundle, which was small enough the other way to be got through the opening.

Then Mrs. Briggs was about to get ready to accompany him, but he dissuaded her.

"If you were seen going out with me," he said, "every one would know that we had found her, and it would be the easiest thing in the world to follow us. But, alone, I can easily elude pursuit, even if the truth is suspected."

It was a hard struggle for the loving mother to forego the opportunity to see her outcast child, perhaps the last time for she knew not how long. She charged Little Leather-Breeches with an almost endless message. It would be impossible for him to remember half of it.

But its whole purport was love and confidence in her innocence; and Little Leather-Breeches repeated enough of it to make Belle weep tears of gratitude and feel that all would not be lost so long as she retained her mother's love.

She exchanged her wet clothes for dry ones and ate heartily, and it revived her strength and courage.

Then Little Leather-Breeches instructed her how to fasten one end of the ball of twine to a jagged point of rock, and explore the corridors, paying out the string as she went, so that she could always find her way back.

He had also supplied her with some flour tied in a bag, so that, by striking it against the wall she could mark the various corridors as she entered them, and thus might avoid going down the same one twice.

"And now, dearest," he said, finally, "keep your presence of mind, and you can do this as well as if I were with you. When you reach the mouth of the cave, come directly to the knoll northwest of the witch's hut, about a quarter of a mile. That is where I am now. I will wait here, so that you will be sure to find me, whether you come back above or under ground."

"Oh, Will! how good you are to me! If I ever get out of here alive, I will show you how I love you!"

"I won't say good-by, my darling—only, hasten!"

She threw a kiss up in his direction, though, the night having fallen, she could not see his face. But he could see her, in the light of her fire and the candle she carried; and he saw the brave smile with which she left him.

Then she went down the corridor, the light of her candle was swallowed up, and the muffled echo of her footsteps died away.

He waited breathlessly, his heart now beating so wildly with anxiety that its dull thud in his ears drowned every other sound.

"God protect her!" he whispered, feeling a cold chill of dread creep over him.

For a moment he blamed himself for letting her go out of his sight. To what nameless terrors had she gone with that hopeful smile on her lips?"

But then reason told him that this was the only way, and he tried to control his fears.

Still he waited, staring down into the cavern at the wan fire, and fairly counting the minutes.

As the time passed his mind became agitated with a conflict of wild hopes and fears.

Every once in a while he thought that he heard footsteps, not in the gloomy cave, but near him among the night-shrouded crags.

Then he would start up with a glad cry of relief. She was coming! A bound, and she would be in his arms!

But it was only the dropping of a twig, or the loosening of a stone from its place.

He would turn again to his agonized vigil, only to stare at the embers slowly crumbling and burying themselves in white ashes.

"This will never do!" he cried, at last. "She has been gone for hours! Something has happened to her! Oh, why did I not find means of getting to her, instead of leaving her to face these hidden perils alone?"

He was nearly crazed with suspense. An icy sweat stood on his forehead, yet his brain seemed on fire.

He kept repeating to himself:

"My God! my God!"

Not a sound had come from the cavern. Only the voices of nature whispered about him.

Then suddenly a wild, agonized shriek filled the cave with blood-curdling stridor!

"Good God!" he cried aloud, quivering in every limb, as he pressed his face close down over the opening.

Not a sound followed.

Then his whole soul leaped from his lips in the wild cry:

"Belle! Belle! Belle! in God's name, answer me!"

His blood was frozen by the horrible response.

The cave echoed and re-echoed with a round of fiendish laughter. Something like the wing of a monster bat fluttered for an instant below, and the dying embers were wholly extinguished.

He stared into the darkness, dumb!

CHAPTER IX.

CUT OFF FROM THE WORLD.

FOR a time Little Leather-Breeches lay flat on the rock, so frozen with terror that he hardly breathed.

Then he woke the wild echoes of the cavern with his cries.

"Belle! Belle! Belle! What has happened to you? For God's sake, speak to me!"

But not a sound answered him.

Then wild frenzy seized him, and leaping to his feet, he fled down the mountain-side as if pursued by a legion of fiends.

In the horror of that moment he lost all presence of mind, and rushed on at a pace that would have been perilous even in the daytime.

Now he tripped over a twig, sprawling his length, tearing his clothes and bruising and lacerating his flesh.

Up and on again, to step into a hole and crash once more to the ground.

Before he reached the level land, he looked as if he had passed through a desperate life-and-death struggle.

His clothes were in tatters, his hat was gone, he was covered with blood and dirt.

So he rushed headlong into the presence of his adopted mother.

"Will! Will! for heaven's sake, what has happened? You have found her? She is dead? Or is it that those fiends have got possession of her?"

"I have no time to explain," he cried. "I want blasting-powder, and ropes, and more candles."

It was lucky that, besides hunting, he had given a great deal of his time to prospecting, and so had some mining-powder in the house.

Of this he took what he thought he would want, and slung it over his back with a coil of rope.

Candles and matches he thrust into his pockets.

Then, before setting out, he looked to the loading of his revolvers.

"Will, what are you about to do?" cried the widow, alarmed by this warlike preparation.

"I am going to fetch Belle to you, living or dead, as I find her, if it costs me my life!" he cried, almost breaking down with grief, as he thought of the more terrible contingency.

"You are not going to fight all of those men?"

"Men or devils, I am going to fight everything that stands in my way to-night!"

"I shall go with you, Will!"

"No, mother, you must not. You can do no good, and—"

"I can prevent you from rashly putting yourself in the grip of the law. Will, you are all that I have left. I can't bear to have you too under the ban."

"There is no danger of that, mother. I am not going to fight our neighbors."

"Whom are you going to fight, then?"

"I don't know. Whoever has Belle in their power."

"What do you mean?"

"You must not ask me now. I will tell you everything when I come back."

Little Leather-Breeches wished to spare his

mother the horrible uncertainty that haunted him.

"Trust me," he pleaded. "And above all, do not detain me! There is not a moment to lose!"

"My son, what is the meaning of this mystery?"

"It is only in kindness to you [that I do not tell you now. Wait until—"

"Why are you so terrified; and whom have you been struggling with?"

"It isn't that. It is only that I have been running, and have had two or three ugly falls in the dark. There! if you want to do the best for Belle and every one, stay here in the house, and let me go without any more delay."

And the mother, more and more bewildered, afraid to oppose him and afraid to let him go, finally yielded.

It was the darkest hour just before dawn. No one was yet astir in the village, and Little Leather-Breeches's aim was to get off unobserved.

He got away to the hills, and then striking a light, searched for a crevice into which he could tamp his powder, so as to enlarge the hole enough to admit his body.

Without knowing what danger he was rushing into, he was resolute to face it alone.

"There is no time to drill holes," he said. "This break in the rock will have to serve."

He charged it with powder, and then tamped it in solid with some reddish, sandy clay.

Then he lighted the fuse and ran to a safe distance.

By this time the dull glow that had appeared in the east while he was at work was streaked with red, and the fleecy clouds were taking on the iridescent tints of mother of pearl.

For a moment all was still, save the sighing of the wind and the monotonous "Caw! caw!" of an early crow that was slowly flapping overhead.

Then, as the east began to quiver with tremulous light, came a puff of white smoke, followed by a roar that woke the hills to wrathful reverberations.

High in the air tossed the fragments of rock, to return to earth in a pattering shower.

Little Leather-Breeches ran forward, crying:

"It won't do to have another such upheaval, or I shall have the whole village up here to see what is going on!"

But it proved to be unnecessary. The aperture had been enlarged enough to admit the passage of his body easily.

Fastening a rope to a spur of rock near by, he dropped the free end into the black hole.

"I may never see the sunlight again!" he said, a chill of apprehension creeping over him, when the moment was at last come to descend.

He looked about him. A wild desire seized him to wait and see the sun rise. But he thought of Belle and the unknown cause that had cut short her cry for help.

With a sense of self-reproach that he could waste an instant, he swung down into the hole and slid down the rope into the darkness.

Too late he reflected that he ought to have lighted a candle, so that he could see about him as he descended.

However, he reached the floor of the cavern without incident, and all about him was as still as death.

He looked up, to see the stars shimmering faintly through the opening.

Then he struck a light.

There was the fire, its embers black and scattered about.

"That, at least, was done by some human hand," he reflected.

Then he turned to the string which led away into the darkness of one of the corridors.

He was about to follow this, when an irresistible longing to take a last look at the world he had left behind before plunging into the dark unknown turned his eyes to the opening overhead.

Then his heart leaped!

Just as the setting sun had illuminated his face the night before and called forth a glad cry of recognition from Belle, so now the rising sun fell upon another face, its owner kneeling on the opposite side of the orifice.

"Mumbo Jumbo!" he cried, involuntarily.

"Yes, my dearie!" replied the old witch.

"What are ye doing down there?"

"The blast has called her out, bad luck to her!" he muttered, trying to think how he could get rid of her without the danger of having her attract the attention of the villagers to what she had discovered.

"Ha! ha! ho! ho!" she chuckled. "You're caught in there like a rat in a trap, ain't you, my lovey?"

This was a new suggestion.

"Confud her! there is no telling what may come into her crazy noddle! Suppose she takes a notion to shut me up in here?"

This opened up a new source of anxiety. Little Leather-Breeches felt that ill-luck dogged his footsteps.

"I say, Mumbo Jumbo!" he called.

"Say what you've got to say quickly; for I'm in a hurry to be off," answered the hag.

"Were you thinking of going to the village?"

"Well, that just depends."

"If I was in your place, I wouldn't do it."

"Oh! You wouldn't, eh?"

"No."

"Well, that's no reason why I shouldn't."

"But you remember that I saved your hut from having the torch put to it."

"That you did, lovey!"

"That shows that I'm your friend, don't it?"

"All the more reason why I shouldn't trust you. It's our friends that betray us. We're not fools enough to let our enemies get the chance!"

"But I have no wish to betray you; and it's only good advice when I tell you not to get in the way of the villagers just now. Remember, they're not very well pleased with what happened last night."

"Are you well pleased with it?"

"At any rate, I'm not disposed to vent my spite on you for what I don't like about it."

"Oh! you ain't, eh? Ha! ha! ho! ho!"

And the old hag chuckled to herself like a malicious ghoul.

"Will you go home and wait until I come for you? I have something that I want to say."

"Oh! I'll go home fast enough; but if you have anything to say this side the grave, now's yer time to say it!"

"What do you mean?" cried Little Leather-Breeches, alarmed at her voice.

"Life's a weary pilgrimage till ye come to the end on't, and then we all wish that it was a day's march further on. Ha! ha! ho! ho! we're brave in the morning; we lie basking in the sun at noon, but when night comes on—when the darkness begins to gather, then we shiver with dread, and try to recall forgotten prayers!"

She looked down at him with a wicked smile, her eyes glittering with snake-like cunning.

Her hand came into view over over the orifice. Something flashed in the sunlight. Then it was no longer clearly distinguishable, as she reached down through the opening.

"Good Heavens! that was a knife!" cried Little Leather-Breeches, his heart leaping into his throat.

"Hold on!" he cried, aloud. "What are you about there?"

"Putting you out of harm's way, lovey!"

"Stop! What are you doing?"

He feared to ask her if she was cutting the rope. If he was mistaken, he dreaded to put the thought into her crazy brain.

"Ha! ha! ho! ho!" she chuckled. "It's dead men's bones that does it. I've been in luck ever since the spell began to work. His flesh to the fishes, his bones to old Mumbo Jumbo, and his soul to the devil! But he was a brave fellow, was Tom, and he died with his boots on! And now he brings grist to my mill! Come here, little loveys, and look. Here's another of them! Ha! ha! ho! ho! Here's a brave lad that's not afraid of death—not he!"

"Good Heavens! what can I do?" cried Little Leather-Breeches, within himself.

"One!" cried the old hag. "Ho! ho! this was made for hanging men with! It's a thousand pities to spoil it! And we're in want of more, instead of less, now that the pretty, tender-handed and tender-hearted misses are taking to the sport! Ho! it's rare sport, this sending men out of the world!"

Little Leather-Breeches gazed up at the old witch as if fascinated. It seemed as if he could scarcely breathe, not to say speak.

But a quivering of the rope caught his eyes, and sent a thrill through his heart.

"Two!" said old Mumbo Jumbo. "Ha! ha! ho! ho! like a rat in a trap!"

"Stop! stop!" shouted Little Leather-Breeches, springing forward and seizing hold of the rope.

In his dismay at the thought of being left in that den of unknown horrors and having the only avenue of escape for himself and Belle cut off—and that to gratify the freak of a crazy old hag—he scarcely knew what he did. Involuntarily he held up the rope, as if to stay it in its place.

"Stop!" he cried, "or I will shoot you!"

And he whipped out his revolver with the full purpose of carrying out his threat.

But the old hag only cackled:

"Ha! ha! ho! ho! three!"

And the rope dropped, coiling about him like a snake!

He shuddered with horror! The thing was done beyond recall! He was stupefied.

He no longer felt any desire to execute his threat. He would have shot her to prevent the catastrophe; but to seek such a revenge would now be futile.

She chuckled at him, cursed him, and then withdrew her face.

He was alone!

Then, recovering himself, he shouted to her wildly, hoping against hope to move her to pity.

But it was too late. She was gone. There was nothing left him but to seek Belle, no longer with the hope of being able to restore her to life among men!

CHAPTER X.

HANDS UP!"

"CONFFOUND such a country! Last night we were buried in the snow, and to-day we are hub-deep in mud! I say, driver! is it this way the year round, out here?"

"Waal boss, I judge we've got about as much climate to the squar' inch in these hyer parts as anywhar between the two frog-ponds."

"H'm! it looks like it!"

"It ain't often as the doctors growls."

"Eh?"

The outside passenger, who sat muffled up to the chin, started and looked sharply round at the Jehu.

He thought that he detected some covert significance under the words spoken.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

Hen Halladay chuckled softly.

"Waal, boss," he said, looking out of the corner of his eyes at the man at his elbow, "I thought as you had a kind o' saw-bones way with ye."

"How do you make that out?" asked the passenger, his eyes quickening with curiosity.

"Waal, ye see any one could tell that you got yer livin' by craft."

"Craft?"

"Head-work. So I says, says I, he ain't no gospel-slinger; he pays as he goes. He ain't given to swappin' lies fur to cheat widders an' orphings; he don't have the cheek o' that sort. He don't dress the politician, nor come the soft-sawder with an ax to grind. But he looks as if a good fat fee wouldn't turn his stomach; so I judge he's a salivator."

The passenger smiled, but did not gratify the stage-driver's curiosity.

"I guess the chances are that he has caught a glimpse of my instrument case," he said to himself.

"Are we going to strike some dinner before long?" he asked.

"Waal, stranger, at this rate, I judge we'll make the Glen not fur from sun-down."

The passenger settled himself further down into his muffler and grunted his discontent inarticulately.

"Confud a man who will go to the world's end on a fool's errand!" he reflected, moodily. "The boy's rubbed out, as they say, years ago; and as for health, bah! this one infernal ride has used me up more than a year's practice at home!"

Turning to the driver, he asked:

"I say, friend! do you know anything about the massacre that took place out here a dozen or fifteen years ago?"

"Fourteen by the watch, stranger! Waal, ef I don't, thar's no use in your goin' further for information!"

"You know all about it, I suppose?"

"D'yee see that thar groove that ye kin lay yer finger in?"

The driver took off his hat and held over his head so that his passenger might satisfy himself that this was no exaggeration.

The stranger was content with merely looking at the spot.

"Waal, that thar means massacre! They laid yer humble servant out as white as tripe; an' it was fool's luck that I didn't git my hair raised."

"Then perhaps you can tell me if there were any other survivors."

"I jest kin, boss, ef I've a mind to."

"Have you a mind to?"

"I hain't nothin' ag'in' it."

"You would oblige me greatly."

"Waal, boss, thar was jest two kids that come through that scrimmage with hides that would hold water—two kids, the Mad Millionaire, and yer humble servant."

"Kids?"

"Young ones."

"Children."

"No! Who told ye?"

"I gathered it from your somewhat enigmatic expressions."

"Smart boy! Go to the head o' the class!"

"Who were these children?"

"Now ye'r gittin' me!"

"You don't know?"

"Bein's as I was jest put onto the line. I hadn't been in the place an hour, when it was whoop! crack! bang! an' the devil to pay! They didn't leave nothin' o' that thar burg but a grease-spot an' a hole in the ground!"

"But the children escaped?"

"Somebody had the good sense to tie 'em to a hoss an' then cut the critter loose. He run 'em out without nary scratch, which shows that hoss-sense beats the human."

"What has become of them?"

"They fetched up at the Glen, an' a good woman adopted 'em both."

"At Glendale—the very place we are approaching!"

"Exactly!"

"But was there no attempt made to trace the parentage of the children?"

"Who'd give it away, with everybody what known huntin' their hair?"

"You spoke of a mad millionaire."

"Clean gone, boss! He got a tap on the knowledge-box, like I did. I managed to crawl into the bushes, whar they found me laid out the next day. He must 'a' had 'nuff sense to git away in the woods; but when the folks in the Glen come up to reconnoiter, they found him peggin' away at a minin' claim, as crazy as a bed-bug, the which he hain't been no better ever sense. Thar wa'n't no one to dispute his title, an' the claim panned out big money, while ye couldn't make grub-stakes anywhar else. He's sharp enough to look after the pay-dirt, but that's all."

"An' now, boss, you've pumped me dry."

Without a word the passenger handed over his pocket-flask.

The stage-driver laughed as he accepted it.

"Stranger," he said, "you'd win the heart of a lime-kiln, you would!"

"You haven't told me the name of the people who adopted the children."

"A widder, boss, what answers to the name o' Briggs. They call the boy Little Leather-Breeches."

"Waal, I sw'ar!"

The ejaculation was called forth by the sudden coming upon a solitary horseman, as the stage swept round a bend in a densely-wooded glen.

The stranger had a carbine at his shoulder, and cried in ringing command:

"Hands up!"

The prancing and snorting stage-horses were drawn up, and out of the surrounding thickets appeared other horsemen.

"H'm! it seems that we are to have a taste of true Western life," said the passenger, coolly, having complied with the order of the road-agent.

"That's right, stranger. Take the thing quietly, an' it'll save stickin'-plaster!"

"Do you observe a peculiar limp in that horse?" asked the stranger, as the road-agent advanced.

"I jest do!"

"It may be worth remembering."

"I don't see what good kin come of it."

"We may see it again some time."

"An' spot the rider?"

"Yes."

"Boss, you air a cool hand! Ever been West before?"

"No."

"Waal, you'd better stay. This hyar is jest the country fur such as you."

"I say, Johnny! stop yer chin-music, an' feel about that gent's clothes for his war supplies."

"Pard, I hear ye!"

And the driver complied, but, having passed his hands over the body of his passenger, was forced to report:

"Pard, he ain't heeled, an' that's a fact!"

"He has no business in this country, then."

"Don't you be too sure o' that!"

The passenger now spoke for himself.

"On principle, I am opposed to cheating the hangman," he said, coolly. "I understand that you have effective executors of justice in this part of the country."

The highwayman laughed.

"You're welcome to call on Judge Lynch, if you think he can help you out," he said. "But just now we'll trouble 'you to get down off of there."

"He speaks in a disguised voice," mused the passenger, as he got down.

The inside passengers were called out and made to stand in a row.

Then the road-agents "went through" them with a celerity which bespoke practice.

Meanwhile, the gentleman first introduced to the reader quietly observed the men, all of whom were masked, and their horses.

"And now, gentlemen," said the chief of the outlaws, "I wish you a pleasant good-afternoon! When you report this outrage, be kind enough to say that I treated you with courtesy."

The road-agent dashed away down the road.

The despoiled passengers got into the coach and continued on their way.

Some were grumpy; some took it philosophically, laughing at it as a joke; the outside passenger was thoughtful.

But their misfortunes were not over yet. An unlucky rut wrecked a wheel, so that, after a night of unmixed discomfort, they entered the village of Glendale just at the break of day.

The outside traveler registered himself at the tavern as Doctor Denslow, of Rochester, New York.

At breakfast he was treated to a detailed account of the tragedy that had occurred two days previously.

Without committing himself, he drew from his loquacious landlord an account of Little Leather-Breeches.

He then went to call upon Mrs. Briggs.

The poor woman was in a high state of nervous excitement. A sleepless night, followed by the suspense and uncertainty of the new mystery as to Belle's fate, was too much for her.

Instead of obtruding his business at such a time, he was considerate enough to look to her well-being.

"Madam," he said, "I have heard of your distress, and have come to see if I cannot be of service to you. I am a physician of many years' experience in the city of Rochester, and I think I may say of fair success. Giving way to your trouble as you are doing may be followed by serious consequences to your health. I beg that you will be advised by me, and allow me to prescribe a composing draught."

"Oh, sir!" cried the poor mother, "if a kind Providence has sent you to offer some protection to my misjudged child, it will relieve me more than anything you can do for me personally."

And clinging to his hand with a sudden confidence in his disposition and ability to befriend her and hers, she gave vent to tears.

"Depend upon it, my dear madam, your daughter shall have considerate treatment, whatever the facts may prove to be."

In an hour he had the distressed mother in bed, sleeping profoundly, under the care of a kind neighbor.

Returning to the tavern, he was arrested on the threshold by a furious clatter coming down the road.

"Waal, I sw'ar!" ejaculated mine host of the Glendale Tavern. "Ef hyer ain't the Mad Millionaire, as spick and span as if nothing had happened!"

And down the road came a wagon, drawn by four horses, the driver standing up and cracking his long whip out over their heads, as he laughed:

"Ha! ha! ha-a-a-ah! ha! ha! Here we are again! Hallo, neighbor Costar. You see, I've found them! Richard is himself again!"

"Consarn his pictur'! It's the same old rattle-head, every time ye see him!" said the stage-driver, who was lounging before the door.

But Doctor Denslow was looking intently at the horses, and then with penetrating scrutiny at their driver.

"Is that the man you call the Mad Millionaire?" he asked, as the team went by.

"It ain't nobody else," was the reply.

"And those are his horses?"

"Whose else should they be? They stood him at a thousand dollars a span."

"Do you notice anything peculiar about the nigh leader?"

"Only this—tha' ain't nothin' in this hyere section that kin touch it! It's the best o' the four, by all odds."

"As a saddle-horse?"

"Yes."

"Exactly. Well, do you observe that it has been hurt?"

"That's so, boss. It limps. I reckon it had a fall night before last, before they got over the seare from that blizzard."

"Have you recently seen an animal that limped in that way?"

"Eh?"

"In short, didn't I call your attention to that particular horse only yesterday afternoon?"

"You? Me? That hoss? Yesterday afternoon?"

The stage-driver stared at the animal, then at the speaker, and back again, in bewilderment.

Doctor Denslow smiled with a peculiar significance, and waited in silence for the other's mind to make the proper associations.

After a long stare at the horse in question, the stage-driver fixed his eyes on the face of the doctor in a steady look of inquiry.

Then he blew a prolonged whistle of surprise, and muttered:

"Dang my skin!"

"What's that?" demanded the landlord, his interest piqued.

The Mad Millionaire wheeled his horses and came down the road again at a spanking pace, as if making the home stretch on a race-course.

Before the door of the tavern he drew them up in magnificent style.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, a shade of anxious inquiry passing over his face, "I have my beauties back again—a little the worse for their tear through the storm, but better than I dared to expect. I hope others have been as fortunate. What's the good word from the search for Miss Briggs?"

A lot of the villagers were before the tavern, listening open-mouthed to the account of the attack on the stage.

From them the Mad Millionaire got only sulken frowns and wrathful mutterings.

They were not quick to forgive him his share in the escape of the murderer.

He smiled nervously and drove on.

"And the same voice—disguised, of course?" continued Doctor Denslow, looking at the stage-driver.

Hen Halladay scratched his head nervously.

"The deuce and all, boss," he said, presently, "that can't be! The man's as crazy as a bedbug—has been so these fourteen years."

"Not so crazy but that he seems to have a keen eye to the main chance," persisted the doctor.

"What is this hyer?" again urged the landlord.

"Let us into it, Hen."

"I leave it to the doctor hyer," said Halladay, shrinking from the responsibility.

"You are better known to these people than I am," said the doctor. "Besides, I propose to go to bed."

And he walked into the tavern without more ado.

Hen Halladay was at once besieged; and ten minutes later, when the Mad Millionaire returned to the tavern, he was stopped and dragged out of his wagon by an intensely excited mob.

"Gentlemen! gentlemen! what is the meaning of this?" he cried.

"You infernal road-agent!" was the retort, "you'll mighty soon find out! The fool dodge is played out, and won't go down any longer with this community!"

The passengers of the robbed coach being appealed to, identified the horses as those ridden by the road-agents; and though there was some doubt as to the voice being the same as that of the disguised man who pulled up the coach, the more the matter was discussed, the more general became the impression of its identity.

"That's his 'pocket!'" cried an indignant, because unlucky, miner. "That's why, while the rest of us, as hasn't had the sense to chuck our picks an' pans down the nearest prospectin'-hole an' pitch in an' see what we kin git off the top o' the airth—that's why, while the rest of us have been scratchin' a poor man's back these fifteen years, he's drivin' four-in-hands 'round the country, whoopin' er up all the time!"

It was notorious that the country had been infested by road-agents ever since its first settlement, and though the Vigilantes had cut off a straggler here and there, the leading spirit had always managed to elude capture.

So now only one voice was raised in behalf of the Mad Millionaire.

"Friends," said the Rev. Mr. Vance, "I beg of you to proceed with caution. The evidence seems to me very inconclusive, when you come to consider that this man has lived in our midst for years, and has never before fallen under suspicion of any kind. I appeal to you, sir," he continued, addressing Doctor Denslow, who had come down in not the pleasantest humor from an ineffectual attempt to sleep.

Somehow Belle Briggs had got to running in his head, though he asked himself impatiently what concern he could have with a total stranger, accused of murder.

"I appeal to you, sir," urged the minister, "to pass upon his sanity."

"If I am summoned before the proper authority, I will do that with pleasure," growled the doctor, who was not partial to "the cloth."

"Meanwhile, my impression of this section is that it is rather bloodthirsty all round!"

With this cold comfort the minister turned away, and the Mad Millionaire remained in the hands of the mob.

CHAPTER XI.

A NEST OF OUTLAWS.

FOR a moment after the rope fell into his hands Little Leather-Breeches was fairly stunned.

The necessity of keeping Belle's whereabouts a secret had led him to keep even Mrs. Briggs in ignorance of where he had gone.

His only chance of succor then from the outside world lay in the curiosity of the Mad Millionaire. If he returned to see what had become of the supposed fairy, Little Leather-Breeches could make himself known.

But this involved the betrayal of Belle.

Then our hero remembered that there must be another way out—the way by which Belle had found her way in.

"Here is the string!" he exclaimed, catching sight of it. "With its aid I can thread the labyrinth as I directed her to do."

He then recalled the wild shriek which had filled him with fear as to her fate, and leaving the problem of escape until he should have found her, he set out at once down the corridor into which the clew led.

Carrying his revolver at full cock, he held the candle above his head in the other hand, and so advanced, on the alert for a surprise.

He soon came to where Belle had dropped the ball when she fled from the old witch.

After that there was nothing to guide him, and chance led him to take the passage before which Belle had hesitated, and down which Mumbo Jumbo had made her appearance.

But there were innumerable ramifications in this branch of the cavern, and he did not proceed far over the way by which the witch had returned.

He had advanced for full half an hour, carefully marking his course so as to know what passages he had visited and the direction in which he had gone through them, when he perceived a murmuring sound, as of voices in conversation.

"Now then I must be careful!" said he. "This light will betray me. By keeping hold of the string, I can always find my way back, even in the darkness. I will mark this spot so as to know it again when I come to it, and then count my steps."

He did so, and then blowing out his candle, proceeded in the darkness.

As he advanced the sounds became more distinct, until he became sure that there were several men talking excitedly.

"They are our enemies!" he exclaimed, at once identifying himself with Belle. "They have traced her to the cave, and captured her!"

With a sudden swelling of the heart, and a determination to fight for her to the death if necessary, he gripped his weapon more firmly, and crept forward.

Presently he discerned a dull glow, and turning an angle, came in sight of a torch stuck in a crevice of the cavern wall.

But the speakers were not within range of his vision; and the abundance of light showed that this was but one of several torches by which the chamber was illuminated.

Little Leather-Breeches paused and listened.

"I tell ye what it is, pard," said a voice which Little Leather-Breeches recognized as Hank Drake, "we've got to handle our irons mighty gingerly, or we'll git our fingers burnt."

"It wasn't such a bad scheme to use the luny's hosses to pull up the coach with," replied another, whom also our hero identified. "That gent had a sharp eye in his head; and by the way he spotted them critters, he'll know 'em ag'in when he sees 'em. Ha! ha! ha! it'll be a joke if he drops onto the luny and jugs him, and maybe stretches his neck!"

"The parson knows what he's about, an' don't you furgit it! It was the Mad Millionaire that run off the gal; an' ef he kin git him in a box, he'll come the honey-fugle psalm-singin' an' prayin' dodge over him, an' make him spit out what he done with her, before he puts him on the straight shute to glory."

"But, say! that was a bad kink in that Seaver affair. What do ye suppose has become o' the galoot?"

"I'll tell ye some other time—after we find out!"

"But dead men don't git up an' walk off."

"No more they don't. Therefore he wa'n't dead."

"It ain't like the parson to bungle things like that."

"We all make mistakes, Johnny. Ef you didn't, nobody'd ever git caught. Then whar'd be the use for Vigilance Committees?"

"Say, pard! this hyer will be a mighty good place to emigrate from if Seaver gits off an' blows on us. He had us piped down fine, an' no mistake."

"So much the worse fur him! It was curiosity, ye know, that made all the trouble in the world."

"But, Hank, how was it that the parson managed to shunt the thing off onto the leetle gal?"

"Waal, that was more luck than anything else. Ye see, he found her little barker at the picnic whar she lost it, and was soft enough to keep it jest because it belonged to her."

"Sweet on her, eh?"

"Slightly!"

"But how in thunder did he come to put her in such a box, then? That was a mighty queer way of showin' his affection!"

"Waal, ye see, she give him the mitten in a way that was calculated to rile any man."

"You was hangin' around whar you had the chance to hear it?"

"Yes."

"I thought it was your duty to pick him off?"

"Ef I got the chance. But the parson seen his opportunity, an' went fur it. He put a stopper on the blab-mouth, an' got the leetle gal in a hole at the same time. Then he calculated to run her off an' have his way with her, after all."

"An' now she's the deuce knows whar, an' Abe Seaver is spirited off ditto! What do you suppose that crazy coot done with her, anyway?"

"Ask me an easy one!"

"Hold on, pard! Hyar comes the Capl!"

The conversation was brought to an abrupt conclusion, and the speakers, of whom there appeared to be a dozen or more, moved about hurriedly, like eye-servants preparing to receive their master.

Little Leather-Breeches stood in the dimly illuminated corridor with mouth agape.

In the few minutes while he had listened, there had been opened up to him a deep and damnable plot of villainy.

Whom did it involve? The very man against whom he brushed every day!—his neighbors, whom he had never dreamed of suspecting of such a thing!

But he learned that the scream he had heard had not been caused by Belle's capture by the conspirators. They had just expressed ignorance of her whereabouts.

There was one suspicion which he hesitated to entertain until it had found confirmation in the sound of the voice of the new-comer.

In his eagerness he forgot the danger of being detected by some one coming to a point where they could see down the corridor in which he was, and crept further forward.

"Come, my men!" said a brisk voice, so different from the gentle drawl for which he had listened that he scarcely felt sure that it could be the same, "there is no time to be idling here. The Mad Millionaire is in the calaboose, where he can be got at any time in the next twenty-four hours. What lies immediately before us, is to find Abe Seaver and to head off this young bantam, Little Leather-Breeches. We can manage him without much difficulty, I fancy, if we once get our hands on him. He is virtually an outcast; and no one will take the trouble to look him up, if he mysteriously disappears. He is now somewhere; either looking for Belle Briggs, or keeping her in hiding; I am not sure which. In any case, all I ask is to get him once safely in our den. Nobody tells any tales who once gets in here!"

And the speaker finished with a laugh.

"He!" muttered Little Leather-Breeches, scarcely able to believe the evidence of his senses. "Well, of all the wolves in sheep's clothing!"

Without warning a man suddenly appeared before the mouth of the passage, and stood staring at him blankly!

Our hero's wits were never wool-gathering. Taken by surprise, he instantly conceived the only plan that would protect him from betrayal.

Like a flash his revolver flew up so as to cover a spot directly between the outlaw's eyes; and with the other hand he beckoned to him.

The man turned pale, realized his situation,

and without uttering a sound to attract the attention of his comrades, advanced to the corridor.

Little Leather-Breeches retreated backward, keeping his weapon trained on his victim; and the other followed him, step for step.

So they reached an angle, passing which they would be in darkness.

Our hero knew that in such a situation he would lose the advantage he held as long as his mark was visible; so he passed out of sight, but in a whisper commanded the other to halt, when he had come so close that he could almost have reached him with his extended hand.

"I've got you, you arch villain!" he whispered: "and if you utter a sound, I'll blow your brains out, as you deserve, but that it would be cheating Judge Lynch! A pretty leader of road-agents you are! All you want is to get Little Leather-Breeches into your den! Well, you've got him; or rather he's got you! Put your weapons on the ground; but be careful not to try to get in a snap-shot on me. Remember, when you get ready to shoot, I may not be just where you expect to find me, as you cannot see me, though I can see you. And if you were to make a mistake, you wouldn't never have a chance to retrieve it in this world!"

White to the lips, the outlaw captain drew his revolver and laid it on the ground at his feet, without a word.

He knew when he was "down."

Having seen his bowie placed beside it, Little Leather-Breeches lighted a candle, and then commanded his captive to pass him and walk on in advance.

The discomfited villain did as he was bid, still without a word.

They had proceeded but a few paces further, when our hero discovered that what would have proved an advantage had the disappearance of the captain passed unnoticed, was destined to prove a mistake.

Voices were heard calling from the chamber they had just left.

"Hallo, Cap! where have you gone to? What are you doin' in that in the dark?"

With the quickness of light Little Leather-Breeches sprung forward.

"Tell them that it is all right, and that you don't want to be interfered with!" he whispered, holding his revolver in unpleasant proximity to the captain's temple.

"It's all right, boys!" called the captain. "Just attend to your own affairs, and I'll attend to mine."

But even as he spoke a flood of light came down the passage; and at the angle where our hero had compelled the outlaw captain to disarm himself appeared a group of his followers, one of them bearing a flaming torch.

Instantly Little Leather-Breeches blew out his candle. But the precaution was ineffectual. The ruddy light from the torch brought him and his captive out in bold relief against the black background of rayless space beyond.

At a glance the whole situation was revealed to the astonished rogues.

"Wal, I swear!" cried one, with an oath, "ef that's what you call all right, I should like to see something that was all wrong!"

"Crowd against the wall and let me pass you; or you are a dead man!" fairly hissed Little Leather-Breeches.

And so terrible was the intensity of his menace that the man whom he held in his power sprung aside.

Little Leather-Breeches flashed by, and so escaped the danger of getting a shot in the back.

Now he was able to face his enemies; and still holding their chief under cover, he cried:

"Now, men, it must be plain to you that I have your captain. There are enough of you to make mince-meat of me in short order; but you can't do it in time to prevent me from laying him out."

"And you, sir!"—to the captain—"recommend discretion to your men, if you value your life."

"What do you wish me to do?" asked the outlaw, to gain time to think up some way of outwitting the boy who had trapped him so cleverly.

"Order your men back into the chamber where I came upon you."

"And what do you propose to do with me?"

During the moment that had passed since the outlaws came upon him, Little Leather-Breeches had entirely changed his plans.

With the necessity of guarding his captive every instant, and exposed to ambush by the outlaws in a cavern the windings of which he knew nothing about, while they might know all about them, he knew that it would be hopeless

for him to attempt to find and rescue Belle and take her safely to the outer world.

But now that he could face all the world and prove her innocence, he had but to effect his own escape to command the whole force of the village to return and search for her.

So he answered without hesitation:

"I propose to march you out past all of your men, and carry you a prisoner to town!"

"And do you fancy that I will prefer the certainty of hanging to the chance of being fatally shot here?"

"No. You will count upon the chance of escaping me somewhere in the passage through your men or after we have left the cave."

"You are very shrewd."

"I am also getting impatient!"

The captain of the outlaws understood this hint; but just as he was about to turn to his men and give them the required order, Little Leather-Breeches saw his face suddenly lighten, as he glanced past our hero in the direction opposite to that where his men stood.

At the same time, a low ejaculation escaped from some of the men; and their captain's eager look was reflected on their faces.

Like a flash Little Leather-Breeches whirled round, and saw at his back a man whose blank look of bewilderment showed that he had just made his appearance at that end of the corridor, and was at a loss what to make of the scene before him.

Little Leather-Breeches recognized in him a crony of Hank Drake's; besides, the evident pleasure with which the outlaws had hailed his appearance was sufficient proof that he was one of them.

It was plain, then, that the lad stood between two fires; and only the promptest action could save him from capture, if not death.

He saw his one chance, and leaped for it without an instant's delay.

With a lightning snap-shot he sent a bullet into the brain of the last intruder, and springing toward him, snatched the torch out of his hand before it fell to the ground.

Then he turned, to receive the captain of the outlaws with an equally effective bullet, if he found him in the act of trying to leap upon him; but that worthy knew too well the wonderful activity of the boy he had to deal with to try to capture him empty-handed. Instead, he bounded toward his men, shouting:

"A revolver! a revolver! Give me a revolver!"

They rushed forward with vindictive yells; and, knowing that he could not cope with them, Little Leather-Breeches sprang away, now forced to trust to his star of destiny.

The windings of the passages gave them little opportunity to fire at him, though they improved what there was of it.

He ran what seemed to him a mile, without the faintest idea of direction or anything save that certain death was behind him, whatever might lie before, when suddenly he ran into a small chamber, which was nothing more than a swell in the passage, and discovered that it contained a lot of open powder-kegs, which to his hurried glance seemed to be full of the combustible.

His thought was that, by a circuitous route, he had come back to the outlaws' retreat, and that escape lay just beyond.

What then was his dismay to see some one rushing toward him with a blazing torch held above her head!

But before he had lifted his revolver with that fatal aim which would have carried swift death to any one opposing his progress, he discovered that it was not an outlaw, but the witch to whose malice he owed his imprisonment.

She glared at him with a wild shriek of fury, and it seemed to be her purpose to thrust her torch into his face.

However he had no time to bother with an old beldam, besides that at the same instant he caught sight of something on beyond that sent his heart into his mouth with mingled delight and terror; and deftly dodging her, he kept on, while she continued toward the chamber containing the powder.

His pursuers reached the other entrance to this fatal chamber in time to see what it contained, and to divine the purpose of the insane creature who thus held their lives at the mercy of any whim that might cross her distraught fancy.

"Back! back!" she shrieked. "Ye shall not desecrate the temple of the god!"

She waved the torch over her head until it seemed impossible that no dropping spark should fall into one of the open kegs.

With cries of terror they turned to fly.
Then the poor, crazy creature was thrilled with an insane triumph.

"Ha! ha! ha! ha-a-a-a-ah!" she shrieked.
"Now is the hour of my long-waited-for triumph! Before death claims me I will bury the world under this mountain of rock! B'elzebub, I come to you, bringing my tens of thousands!"

And she plunged her torch into an open powder-keg!

CHAPTER XII.

THE WITCH'S LAST BLOW.

BELLE found herself in an immense and intricate labyrinth, but saw nothing to startle her save the vast, still solitude.

She therefore entered upon her attempt to thread the maze with hopefulness.

If the worst came, and she failed utterly to find her way out, she knew that the opening could be enlarged so that she could reach the outer world through it.

"Will is at the other end of the string!" she kept saying to herself; "and with him there, I have nothing really to fear."

So she buoyed up her courage until she had exhausted one great ramification of the cavern.

Finally, as she stood before a black opening which led her knew not where, she was overpowered with a sense of weariness and a longing to see once more the face that linked her to life and love.

Several hours—it seemed like days to her!—must have passed since she left him.

"I ought to return, if only to reassure him," she said. "He must be anxious at my long absence. Besides, I must be not far from the chamber where he is waiting."

Even as she thus debated with herself, she saw an illumination of the rocky walls down the corridor before which she stood hesitating.

"Oh! it is he!" she cried, with a sudden thrill of wild delight. "He has got tired of waiting for me, and resolved to find his way in to me! Will! Will! Will!"

She sprung forward, heedless that the rapid movement blew her candle out.

In her assurance that the next moment would see her leaping into his arms, she threw away the now useless taper.

"Ha! ha! ha! ha!" she laughed, hysterically. "Oh, Will! Will! my darling!"

"Ha! ha! ho! ho!" came the response, in a rasping tone that curdled her blood with terror. "I'm yer darling, am I? I'm yer Will! I've open arms for ye, I have! I've a love-kiss for ye that ye'll not soon forget! I'll bite my one tooth through yer lip! How's that, my deary? Ha! ha! ho! ho!"

And there before her, at the other end of the black vista, stood the hag she had always feared, though more than ever since that horrible prediction of the fate that was so soon to overtake her.

Mumbo Jumbo stood holding a torch above her head and clinging to her staff with the other hand, while she peered at the maiden with a malicious grin.

Her rags hung about her like Spanish moss from the limbs of a dead tree.

Belle stood aghast, terror chaining her feet to the spot.

"Ha! ha! ho! ho!" chuckled the old hag. "Ye're there, with the blood on yer soul! Would ye like to see yer victim—the fool ye sent to his long reckoning because of his love for you? Ho! here's a fine world! We're turning the Scripture round in these modern days. It's a blow for a kiss now; and it's the woman that gives the blow! Well, that isn't so bad. Generally it's lies and perjury and shame and sorrow in return for love, with the woman the sufferer. But come with me, my deary. I've had a tender spot in my heart for you ever since you showed yer pretty pluck, and set them by the ears so cleverly. There's bad blood among them yet, and it's bound to be let out by one or another before they're quit of it. Come with me, my pretty murderer! Ha! ha! ho! ho!"

And the hideous old wretch hobbled forward, thumping her staff on the rocky floor, and chuckling with ghoulish glee.

For a time Belle stood with lips apart and fluttering breath, staring at the approaching monster as if fascinated.

Then with a shriek of abject terror she turned and fled down the passage.

The wicked laughter of the old beldam followed her, giving wings to her feet; but as she rushed headlong into the darkness, she stumbled and fell, consciousness leaving her, as much from terror as from the shock.

Mumbo Jumbo overtook her, and stood over her like a hideous old incubus.

Then she heard Little Leather-Breeches calling frantically; for Belle had fallen within a few paces of the chamber above which he waited.

"Who's that?" she asked herself. "There can't be another with her? How could they get in? I've always feared these endless windings would admit some one to my temple. I must block the passage—that's what I must do! I've been a fool to put it off so long. They mustn't see this light!"

And dashing the torch against the rock, she extinguished it, leaving herself in total darkness.

Then turning her face down the passage in the direction whence the voice came, she cried:

"Eh? what's that? A light!"

It was a faint illumination of the wall of the corridor, so faint that it had not been perceptible while her torch cast its brighter glow.

"I'll see my enemies, at any rate!" she muttered.

Shuffling forward, she discovered the dying embers of the fire Belle had built.

She also found that the cries came from overhead.

"It's some one at the chimney-top! Oh! I know that well!" she cried, her ugly face lighting with relief. "There's no harm in their amusing themselves there. Cry away, my dear! But I'll give you a little start, if there's superstition in your soul."

And taking off her cloak, she beat the last waning embers out with it.

Then she advanced boldly into the darkened chamber, and looked up.

She now recognized Little Leather-Breeches's voice.

"Ha! ha! ho! ho!" she chuckled, "it's our brave young lover! The spell works better and better! He'll not stay above ground with this mysterious uncertainty overhanging the fate of his love! We'll have him down here next! Ha! ha! it's dead men's bones that does it! All my luck is coming at once, after all these weary years of waiting! But I must get ready to receive him. It won't do to let him get back, to lead all the world in on me. No! no! whoever enters the witch's den must never leave it alive!"

She hobbled back in the darkness to where she had left Belle lying in a swoon.

There she relighted her torch and stuck it in a crevice in the wall.

She then picked up the unconscious girl, throwing her over her shoulder as if she were a sack of grain, and so hobbled off with her down the corridor.

We have seen that she was in the upper world in time to cut off Little Leather-Breeches's escape from the trap into which he had lowered himself.

Returning to where she had left Belle, she found the girl just recovering consciousness.

Our heroine opened her eyes on as strange a scene as ever appealed to the superstitious fears of mortal.

She was in the midst of a vast subterranean chamber, illuminated by a fire burning on a tripod, or three-legged brasier.

This stood on a sort of natural dais, which occupied one side of the cavern, forming a platform higher than her head, the sloping sides of which had been wrought by art into rude steps.

At the back of this dais, and resting against the wall of the cavern, stood a throne of most hideous construction.

It was fashioned out of the glistening white bones of dead animals!

The framework—legs, seat and arms—was made of leg bones. The high back was "herring-boned" with ribs radiating from vertebrae.

The seat and overhanging canopy were made of shoulder-blades and the flat bones of the pelvis.

At intervals all around the edge of the dais, like the foot-lights of a theatrical stage, were placed the skulls of cattle.

Before the dais, in the center of the cavern, was a chair made of the horns taken from these skulls.

Belle awoke to consciousness to find herself seated in this chair, bound to her place. At her feet lay the body of Abe Seaver, ghastly and dabbled with blood. On the dais, beside the brasier, stood the old hag, Mumbo Jumbo, waving her staff over the blaze, and muttering some crazy incantation.

Looking beyond the witch, Belle saw seated on the throne what chilled her blood more than all the rest.

It was a human skeleton, perfectly articulated, and posed as with ghastly life!

On its head was a crown made of teeth: its left hand was extended, grasping a long lance-

like scepter, the end of which rested on the ground; the right hand hung idly, the forearm lying along the arm of the throne.

Frozen with terror, the girl stared at this weird spectacle, while the old witch went through a ceremonial such as was probably never seen anywhere except among the lowest order of savages.

It consisted of a chant in unintelligible jargon, often accompanied by a rude, hopping dance, while she went round and round the dais, waving her staff over the blaze, and dropping things into it. Every time she passed before the enthroned skeleton she would prostrate herself before it.

From time to time she would descend and wave her staff over the frightened girl, or back and forth over the stark body at her feet.

At such times she would fix her glittering eyes upon Belle, and her voice would be infused with the harshness of bitter condemnation.

At last she withdrew into the darkness of one of the corridors, but presently returned, bearing a chalice, the bowl part of which was made of the top of the skull of some small animal.

Holding this, she prostrated herself before the skeleton. Then she descended, approaching Belle, drawing a knife as she came.

"The god will do nothing until he is propitiated with a feast of human flesh and a draught of human blood!" she said. "Ha! ha! ho! ho! It's a rare charm I'm working now! Did you ever smell the odor of burning flesh—human flesh, I mean? It's sweet!—ho! sweet! that's a matter of taste! But the gods all like it. Queer taste—eh? I say! blood's a rare drink, though. Maybe you never drank any? But blood's the wine of life, you know."

She knelt beside poor Abe's body, and began to strip the clothes from his breast.

"A rare charm!" she muttered, recurring to her purpose. "Ye didn't know—did ye?—that yer lover had followed you into the witch's den, to see what had become of you. Well, he did. Ha! ha! ho! ho! they're all coming to it! It's the spell of dead-men's bones that does it!"

"Now, I couldn't meet him in the natural way, could I? No! no! he'd be one too many for this o'd rack of bones! But the god can manage him! The charm will cast a sleep over him. Then he'll be helpless, and I'll fetch him here and draw off his blood and burn his flesh to work new spells with. Oh! I'll have the whole lot of them under my thumb before I've done with them! Curse them! curse them! curse them!"

"Look! look! Hasn't he a fair white breast? There's not a scar on it. That's what the god likes best. Ye know, Jehovah would only have firstlings without blemishes. Well, now, you'd wonder they'd be so particular, when they only smell the stench from the burning. But they like the heart best. That's queer, ain't it?"

She drew the back of her knife down the breast bone, then from this line outward to the armpit on the left side.

"Ho! ho!" she chuckled. "Here's carving for ye! I reckon that'll do it cleverly."

She then reversed the knife, prepared to cut the flesh.

Upon this fearful spectacle Belle gazed dumbly. She strove to cry out, to deter the wretched creature; but her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth.

She tried to close her eyes, to shut out the horror; but she was fascinated.

The witch drew the point of her knife over the last line she had made, now cutting through the skin, though not deeply, as if only an experimental cut.

A moment after the knife had left it, a fine crimson line appeared. Then drops of blood oozed forth, and ran down over the body.

That broke the spell that had thus far chained Belle's will.

She uttered a piercing shriek.

"See! see!" she cried. "He is alive! The blood flows! I tell you, he is not dead! Stop! stop! you wretched creature! Do you not see that you are cutting into a living man? You will be a murderer!"

The witch looked up with surprise.

"Alive?" she repeated. "Why, of course. Do you suppose I would try to draw blood from a dead body? And the god is like a lion—he wouldn't have carrion. It's the quick flesh he wants. Oh! they're a dainty lot! Ye wouldn't believe it! Ha! ha! ho! ho!"

"But this is horrible!" cried poor Belle. "I never heard of anything so terrible. You cannot be so wicked! It is murder of the most awful kind!"

"Murder!" repeated the old hag, looking up with a grin. "Then there'll be two of us, eh?"

Little Leather-Breeches.

But you're young. What wrongs have you to avenge? But I, now—I who have a hell of recollection, well, that's different. I'm old Mumbo Jumbo. Ye wouldn't believe, to look at me, that I was once as young and pretty as you—that I had lovers—Ha! curse them! curse them all, I say!"

Thrown into sudden rage, she lifted her knife, as if to plunge it into the heart of the inanimate body stretched before her.

But just then her attention was diverted by a confused sound—a murmur of echoes which reverberated through the cavern.

"What's that?" she cried, starting up.

She stood listening, while the sound increased.

First was distinguishable the clear, sharp crack of firearms. Then the echoes revealed a Babel of excited voices. Lastly could be made out the clapping sounds of rapid footfalls.

Belle's heart gave a great bound. Anything in the shape of human life would be preferable to seclusion with this malicious lunatic. She shrieked:

"Help! help! help! oh, help!"

"No, there is no help!" cried the witch, with a burst of wild excitement. "In yonder corridor I have stored enough giant powder to blow this mountain to atoms! Do you suppose I would permit a lot of wretches to invade my temple and desecrate the altar of the god? No! Better that we all be buried together!"

And leaping up the rude steps of the dais, she snatched a brand from the brasier and ran with it toward the passage from which the approaching sounds seemed to come.

"Fool! fool!" she repeated, bitterly, "that I have so long delayed cutting off this avenue for unholy invasion! Now that the charm has just begun to work!—now that my wearily-waited-for revenge is being slaked! No, no; it shall not be! Before their sacrilegious hands shall break the spell of dead men's bones, let us all perish together!"

As she ran with the blazing torch, her hideous face illuminated by its ruddy glare, she looked like a fiend of destruction.

Hiplessly bound, Belle could only scream:

"Stop her! stop her! She is going to blow up the cave!"

She twisted her head round, to see who first appeared where the old witch had gone.

The voices became louder and louder, and the fall of footsteps more distinct, until she was assured that there was a life and death race in progress through the black corridors of the horrible place.

Again and again the air quivered with the sharp, clattering echoes of pistol-shots.

Then a dark figure dashed past old Mumbo Jumbo, who was just disappearing in the black mouth of the passage.

Belle heard voices crying:

"Kill him! kill him! We are lost if he escapes!"

Then arose the shrill scream of the witch:

"Back—back, ye devils! Ha! ha! ha! ha!"

The laugh was a wild shriek of rage and triumph.

It was followed by cries of terror and warning in the deep base of masculine voices.

Then rose a yell of fear, and an instant after came a roar as if the solid earth had been riven to its center.

Blended with the terrible concussion, Belle was conscious of a voice quite near her, uttering words that were unintelligible to her; then she knew dimly that a pair of arms were thrown about her, and lips which thrilled her with delight were pressed to hers, while a loved voice murmured her name.

She strove to respond:

"Will! Will! dear Will!"

But the sound died on her lips.

She struggled only to see him, feeling that it might be the last of earth—that the witch had effected her terrible revenge.

But everything faded out. The rocky roof of the cavern seemed fallen upon her, crushing and smothering her. Then came the blank of unconsciousness.

A word will finish our story.

When Doctor Denslow came to know a little more about the situation, he began to think that he might have made a mistake about the identity of the Mad Millionaire and the road-agent leader.

A more careful examination of the lunatic satisfied him that this was so.

During that examination he learned all about the "fairy," and was not slow to see that it must be something more than a madman's fancy to interest Little Leather-Breeches so mysteriously.

He raised a squad of men, and had himself led to the spot. The blasting told its mute story, the cut rope causing even the good doctor to scratch his head for some time in perplexity.

But a happy remembrance of the part the witch had played in the whole matter gave him what he thought was a clew; and going at once to her hut, he searched it, and found an entrance to the cave at the back of her chimney, far enough up the flue to be out of sight.

While they were preparing to enter here, the earth was shaken by a terrific explosion.

Hurried by this portentous occurrence, they plunged in, and after threading a short passage, came to the witch's temple.

The sight that there awaited them filled the more ignorant with superstitious fears; but Doctor Denslow only saw that there were three persons in the chamber who might be alive or dead.

Abe Seaver lay on the floor; Belle sat bound in her chair; and Little Leather-Breeches lay with his head in her lap, clinging to her as with the grip of death.

The doctor soon satisfied himself that none of the three was dead, though all were unconscious, doubtless from the force of the concussion.

His medical skill brought Belle and her lover round without much difficulty; and leaving them in each other's arms, he addressed himself to Abe Seaver.

He was in a worse way; but he recovered consciousness, and had the strength to make it known that Belle had had nothing to do with his being shot.

The last thing he remembered was seeing her approaching him; so the shot must have come from the opposite direction.

But more than that, he knew a quite different motive for the shot. He had discovered that the supposed minister was an impostor, indeed, the captain of a band of road-agents; and his purpose had been to warn Belle and save her from the humiliation of having received the love addresses of a man who was soon to be unmasked.

He died, with Belle holding his hand and weeping her regrets at her mistaken treatment of him, and her gratitude for his unselfish love.

The scene of the explosion was terrible beyond description. Among the torn and charred and mangled remains, some few were recognized when they had been dug out and carried out to the light of day.

The Rev. Mr. Vance was not disfigured. As he lay awaiting burial, his serene face looked like that of a good man laid to rest.

Old Mumbo Jumbo had been blown to atoms. Her history died with her.

In Little Leather-Breeches Doctor Denslow recognized a nephew of his wife, to make more careful inquiry into whose fate had been a part of his errand West.

But in the Mad Millionaire he found a subject for his professional skill; and by a notable trepanning operation succeeded in restoring him to reason, when it transpired that he was Belle Briggs's father.

Little Leather-Breeches is a hero in his section of the country, and every one for miles around—save and except Kate Ashmead!—loves his beautiful wife, Belle.

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